



# Her Last Promise

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**Description:** FBI Agent Rachel Gift, 33, unparalleled for her ability to enter the minds of serial killers, is a rising star in the Behavioral Crimes Unit—until a routine doctor visit reveals she has but a few months left to live.

Not wishing to burden others with her pain, Rachel decides, agonizing as it is, not to tell anyone—not even her boss, her partner, her husband, or her seven-year-old daughter. She wants to go down fighting, and to take as many serial killers with her as she can, but she can feel herself slipping.

While investigating the murders, a hospice worker recognizes the tired look in Rachel's eye. She can't hide her condition anymore and she knows it.

It is time to confess her truth—but not before she catches her last killer.

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# Page 1

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## PROLOGUE

The first thing Judge Marcus Smith became aware of was the throbbing. A deep, insistent pulse that seemed to emanate from the base of his skull, spreading tendrils of pain through his head. He tried to lift his hand to massage his temple, but his arm wouldn't move.

His eyes flew open, panic cutting through the haze. The ceiling above him was unfamiliar—cheap wood paneling that belonged in a basement rec room, not a bedroom. Not his bedroom. Where the hell was he? The grain of the wood seemed to swim before his eyes, patterns shifting and morphing as his drugged mind struggled to focus.

No...he hadn't been asleep. Where had he been before this? It was maddening that he couldn't remember.

He attempted to sit up, but the rest of his body was just as restrained as his arm. He craned his neck to see what the hell was going on. He was just barely able to see the thick restraints that were holding him firmly against what appeared to be a small bed...maybe even a gurney. The bed's surface was firm and uncomfortable beneath him, the thin mattress doing little to cushion his body. His heart began to race as he tested each limb, finding them all secured. The restraints were professional-grade, the kind often used in hospitals—thick, padded cuffs that held his wrists and ankles immobile without cutting off circulation.

"Hello?" His voice came out as a dry croak, barely recognizable as his own. "Is anyone there?"

Only silence answered him, broken by the soft hum of what might have been a heating system somewhere in the building...wherever he might be.

Fighting against rising terror, Marcus forced himself to study his surroundings methodically, the way he'd analyze evidence in his courtroom. The room was small, maybe twelve by fourteen feet. Wood paneling covered every wall, the dark finish absorbing what little light came from a small lamp perched on a battered dresser. The panels were old, probably dating back to the seventies, with a few water stains visible in the corners where the ceiling met the walls. There were no pictures or decorations of any kind.

Next to the lamp sat an old tube television, its blank screen reflecting his own imprisoned form like a dark mirror. The reflection horrified him—he barely recognized himself. His normally well-groomed silver hair was disheveled, his face pale and drawn. The gray reflection made him look like a specter or zombie.

A chemical smell hung in the air—astringent and medical, reminding him of his wife's recent hospital stay as she'd had her appendix removed. The thought of Carol sent a fresh wave of fear through him. Did she know he was missing? Was she looking for him? He could picture her face, lined with worry, as she talked to the police. Carol had always warned him about making enemies in his line of work, about the risks of being a judge in high-profile cases. Had one of those enemies finally come for him?

Marcus tried to piece together his last memories. He remembered leaving the courthouse, walking to his car in the parking garage. The click of his shoes on concrete, the echo of a car door slamming somewhere in the distance. After that...nothing. Just fragments of sensation—a sharp pain in his neck, the sensation of falling, hands grabbing him before he hit the ground.

He could remember small fragments of it...and that somehow made it so much worse.

It hurt his neck to turn his head too far because of the restraints. But when he looked to the right, something caught his eye. There was an IV stand sitting about two feet away from that side of the bed. Its clear tubing snaked down to disappear beneath a piece of tape on his left arm. His gaze followed the line up to a bag of clear fluid, dripping steadily into his veins. The sight of it made his stomach lurch. There were no markings of any kind on the bag, so he had no idea what was being pumped into his body.

"Oh God." The words escaped in a whisper. "Please, somebody help me!"

His voice sounded pathetic even to his own ears. How many times had he heard similar pleas in his courtroom? How many defendants had begged for mercy before he handed down their sentences? Now he was the one pleading, and there was no one to hear him.

A sound from beyond the closed door made him freeze. Footsteps, slow and deliberate, approaching the room. His mouth went dry, his pulse thundering in his ears. The footsteps stopped outside his door. A moment passed—interminable seconds during which he could barely breathe.

The door handle turned with agonizing slowness, the mechanism's click impossibly loud in the quiet room. A man entered, head bowed, dressed in dark clothing. He moved with quiet confidence, like someone completely at home in this nightmarish scenario. Something about him tickled the edges of Marcus's memory. Had he seen him in his courtroom? There was a familiarity to his bearing, the way he carried himself, but the drugs being pumped into him made it impossible to focus, to place the memory.

The figure moved to the IV stand, adjusting something on the drip line with great concentration. Marcus could not be sure, but he didn't think the man knew what he was doing...or had just learned how to interact with the IV.

"Wait," Marcus croaked, his tongue feeling thick in his mouth. "I know you, don't I? From where? Please, just tell me what's happening."

The man finally raised his head, meeting the judge's gaze. His eyes were startlingly pale, almost colorless in the dim light, and completely devoid of emotion. Recognition flickered in his mind, but before he could grasp it, a familiar heaviness began creeping through his limbs.

"No," he slurred, fighting against the encroaching darkness. "Please don't..."

The man watched impassively as the drugs took hold, those pale eyes the last thing Marcus saw before consciousness slipped away. But in that final moment, a terrible understanding bloomed in his failing mind—he wasn't here by accident. This wasn't a random act of violence.

This was punishment.

As blackness claimed him, Judge Marcus Smith realized he was paying for a decision he'd made, a judgment he'd handed down. But which one? He'd sentenced so many over the years, ruined so many lives in the name of justice. Cases flashed through his mind—murderers, rapists, thieves, all facing him from the defendant's chair. Which one had come back? Which one had—

The thought dissolved into nothingness as the drugs pulled him under completely.

## CHAPTER ONE

Rachel stared at her laptop screen, her eyes dancing across information that was both familiar and somehow foreign at the same time. It was all data she'd internalized nearly a decade ago, and now that she was studying it afresh, it almost seemed new to her. Behind her, the FBI's Richmond field office was almost alarmingly quiet. It was a

slow day so far; in fact, there had been several slow days in a row as of late.

It was why she was allowing herself a moment to satisfy her own curiosity... to look into something that had nothing to do with any active cases. Prison records filled her display—records belonging to a man named Cody Austin. Her jaw clenched as she scrolled through page after page of perfect behavior reports, glowing reviews from prison staff, and participation certificates from various rehabilitation programs.

One term kept coming up over and over again, and it made Rachel feel both angry and sick to her stomach.

Model prisoner.

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"Model prisoner," she muttered, the words bitter on her tongue. "Of course you were."

The memory of last week's phone call to her contact at the Virginia Department of Corrections still burned fresh in her mind. "Released three months ago," he'd told her, his voice crackling over the line. "Good behavior knocked a couple years off his sentence." She remembered how it had been early in the morning, her suspicions that Cody Austin, a ghost from her past, had somehow killed Scarlett in her home, just a few weeks after being released from hospice.

Three months. He'd been walking free for three months, and she hadn't known. The thought made her stomach turn. Three months during which he could have been anywhere, planning for anything. Of course, she knew she was being too hard on herself. Austin had gone into prison almost eleven years ago. She hadn't thought of him at any great length for several years.

Rachel pulled up the old case files on Cody Austin, her own detailed notes appearing alongside crime scene photos she'd memorized over a decade ago. Four murders—maybe six, depending on the circumstantial evidence—all bearing the same signature: victims found peacefully arranged, the scenes described as a home-invasion gone wrong. They were all scenes she'd been unable to link him to, unable to ever properly nail him down.

The first victim had been David Chen, 42, found in his bed by his teenage daughter. Then Maria Rodriguez, 35, discovered in her favorite reading chair, book placed strategically in her lap. James Wilson, 51, slumped over his desk as if he'd dozed off while working late. And finally, Katherine Murphy, 39, laid out on her living room couch, looking for all the world like she was taking an afternoon nap.

Two other cases had fit the pattern—Elizabeth Foster and Thomas Greene—but the evidence had been even more circumstantial than with the others. Rachel had known in her gut that they were Austin's work, too, but she hadn't been able to prove it...just like the four others. She'd never been able to prove any of it.

Her cursor hovered over the autopsy reports. She'd read them so many times she could recite them from memory. Cause of death in each case: blunt force trauma to the head. Simple and to the point...and in all but one case, not all that messy if you knew what you were doing.

In the end, all they'd managed to pin on Cody Austin was reckless assault and attempted kidnapping of Sarah Morton, a thirty-five-year-old elementary school teacher who'd managed to fight him off and escape. The evidence in that case had been solid: security camera footage, DNA under her fingernails, witnesses who'd heard her screams. Even then, Rachel suspected they'd interrupted him before he could complete his usual routine. Sarah Morton had been lucky and feisty—she'd fought back early enough, screamed loud enough, attracted enough attention that Austin had been forced to flee.

Ten years. That's all they'd gotten him for. Ten years, reduced to eight for good behavior.

Rachel's fingers trembled slightly as she pulled up the most recent photo of him, taken just before his release. The same unremarkable face stared back at her—plain features, neutral expression, the kind of face that could disappear in any crowd. But his eyes...there was something in his eyes that had always made her skin crawl. A coldness, a calculation that belied his otherwise forgettable appearance.

She remembered interviewing him after they'd caught him trying to take Sarah Morton. He'd been so...pleasant. Polite. Apologetic, even. Claimed he'd been drunk, made a terrible mistake, would never dream of hurting anyone. He'd looked at Rachel



with those empty eyes and smiled, and she'd known he was lying. Known he was responsible for the others. It was almost as if he were trying to telepathically tell her: I know you know about everything I've done. But...why don't you prove it?

Yes, she had known. But knowing wasn't proving, and proving was what they'd needed.

She clicked through to Scarlett's case file next, her throat tightening. The crime scene photos were still too fresh, too raw. Her friend—her miracle friend who'd beaten cancer against all odds—laid out in her entryway floor, blood surrounding her head...just like Austin's victims from a decade ago.

He was taunting her. She knew it in her bones. But gut feelings didn't hold up in court, and the similarities between Scarlett's murder and Austin's old cases were circumstantial at best. Director Anderson would need more than that, especially given Rachel's history of drawing dangerous attention from past criminals. The bureau was still reeling over the aftermath of her drama with Alec Lynch and Alice Denbrough. She thought of the patrol car that had only recently stopped its regular rounds past her house—the last remnant of the nightmare of having Alice, an overzealous supporter of Alex Lynch, coming after her family.

Somehow, things were finally starting to feel normal again. Jack was settling into his new role at work and as a husband, Paige was thriving (even with her temperamental come-and-go teenage attitudes), and she and Novak were finding their rhythm as partners. Did she really want to risk upending all of that based on a hunch?

Part of her wanted to march straight to Anderson's office, to lay out everything she suspected, to demand resources for a full investigation. But she could already hear his response: "Where's your evidence, Gift? We can't justify a major investigation based on similarities to decade-old cases that never even went to trial." And she also suspected he'd be thinking: Christ, can't you go just a few months without adding

drama to everything?

She rubbed her temples, feeling the beginning of a headache building behind her eyes. Maybe she should talk to Jack first. He'd understand her instincts, help her figure out if she was seeing patterns that weren't really there or if there was something genuine to pursue. She figured she'd bring it up to him tonight after Paige had retired to her room.

A knock at her cubicle door pulled her from her thoughts. She turned to see Novak standing there. She's come to know him fairly well. For instance, she knew that the expectant look on his face meant that he was coming to deliver news from elsewhere... maybe not good news, either if his posture was any indication.

"Hey," Novak said, leaning against the doorframe with an energy that put her a bit more on alert. Despite her initial resistance to working with someone new after Jack's promotion, she'd grown to appreciate Novak's sharp mind and steady presence. He might not be Jack, but he was proving to be a solid partner in his own right.

They'd had a rocky start—her resentment at losing Jack as a partner had bled into their early interactions, and Novak's eagerness to prove himself had sometimes grated on her nerves. But over the past eight months or so, they'd developed a rhythm. He knew when to push and when to back off, when to offer support and when to give her space. More importantly, he was good at his job.

"Hey to you as well," she said. "What's up?"

"Just talked to Anderson. We've got a case." He paused, and Rachel could tell he was trying to contain the excitement of being the first one to have learned about the new case. He was still learning the ropes with Anderson, after all.

"What are we looking at?" Rachel asked.

"Marcus Smith was found dead in his car about an hour ago. Parked right in front of his house. He'd been missing for two days."

Rachel frowned. The name was familiar, tickling something in the back of her mind. "Smith...wait, why is this coming to us?"

"He's a judge. Not a huge name but still widely known. Given his position and some of the cases he's presided over recently, Anderson wants us to rule out any potential security concerns." Novak's expression grew more serious. "Initial reports are...weird. No obvious cause of death, body positioned like he was just taking a nap in the driver's seat."

Rachel's hand froze over her mouse, her pulse quickening. No obvious cause of death. Positioned like sleeping. The parallels hit her like a physical blow, but she forced herself to breathe normally as she closed out the windows containing Austin's files.

"You okay?" Novak asked, his excitement giving way to concern. "If you need more time to catch up on paperwork—"

"No," Rachel said, perhaps too quickly. She stood, grabbing her jacket from the back of her chair. "No, I'm good. Just...thinking about something else." She managed a small smile, one that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Anyway...you said he was missing for two days and then showed up dead in his car?"

"Seems that way based on what the police assigned to the case have to say."

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She got to her feet, closing the lid of her laptop. "Well, you've got my attention...that's for sure. Lead the way."

As they walked to the elevator, Novak filled her in on the preliminary details, his words painting a picture that made Rachel's skin prickle with unease. Judge Smith had last been seen leaving the courthouse on Tuesday evening. His wife had reported him missing when he hadn't come home that night, waiting until one in the morning to make the call. One of his cars—presumably the one he took to work—had been found in the parking lot just behind the courthouse where he worked. But his body had been found in the front seat of another car left at his home.

"The weird thing is," Novak continued as they stepped onto the elevator, "there's no sign of struggle. His wallet, phone, and keys were all still in his pocket, too. Nothing seems to have been taken."

"I see..."

"You sure you're okay?" Novak asked as he started the engine. "You seem distracted."

Rachel looked at him—really looked at him—and felt a flutter of guilt. Early in their partnership, she might have brushed off his concern or given him a sharp response. But he'd earned more than that. They'd been through enough together now that she trusted his instincts, even if she wasn't ready to share everything.

"Just one of those days," she said, softening her tone.

"Is the lull getting under your skin?"

“What do you mean?” she asked.

The elevator stopped and deposited them in the underground section of the parking garage. “It’s been sort of quiet and uneventful for about a week now,” Novak answered. “Times like that always make me feel like something big and overwhelming is right around the corner.”

“Yeah, maybe that’s what it is,” she lied, her thought still very close to Cody Austin.

They approached the sedan they usually took out on cases. He got behind the wheel, and Rachel gladly took position in the passenger seat. She’d become so accustomed to Jack driving when they’d been partners; and though Novak didn’t seem to have a preference one way or the other, he’d seemed to pick up on her non-verbal cues over the past few months that, when given the chance, she preferred not to drive.

“Hopefully this case with the judge won’t be that bog, overwhelming thing,” Novak said as he pulled out of the garage.

As they merged into traffic, Rachel forced herself to focus on the case at hand, shoving thoughts of Cody Austin as far away as she could. Judge Marcus Smith. He was found dead in his car. No obvious cause of death. The facts lined up in her mind like evidence markers at a crime scene, each one pointing to a conclusion she wasn’t ready to face. Of course, without an official police report to go from yet, it was all simply conjecture.

So now it was up to her and Novak to find the hard, concrete answers.

## CHAPTER TWO

The late morning sun cast long shadows across the manicured lawns of Oak Ridge Estates as Novak guided their Bureau-issued SUV through the wrought iron

gates. The homes here weren't just houses—they were statements, declarations of success carved in stone and timber. Each property seemed to compete with its neighbors through meticulously maintained topiaries, cascading fountains, and driveways that curved gracefully toward multi-car garages. Though Christmas was just fifteen days away, few of these luxurious homes had elected to marry their exteriors with decorations—though few had put up lights that sparkled dully, just glass with no flicker as it was a bright, clear day.

It was the sort of neighborhood that spoke of old money and newer aspirations. Stone lions guarded one driveway, while classical statues posed in the reflecting pool of another. The lawns stretched for acres, dotted with ornamental trees that had likely been growing since before Rachel was born.

"Nice neighborhood," Novak remarked, his eyes tracking a gardener trimming hedges into perfect geometric shapes. "Guess being a judge pays well."

The road wound past a small ornamental lake, its surface flat in the early December chill. A family of geese glided across the water, seemingly oblivious to the human drama unfolding in their carefully curated paradise. Rachel's attention was fixed on the solitary police cruiser parked ahead at the Smith residence, its presence oddly subdued against the backdrop of such opulence.

As they rounded the final curve in the road, the entirety of Judge Marcus Smith's residence came into view: a sprawling Georgian colonial, its red brick facade softened by white trim and black shutters. Four tall columns framed the entrance, supporting a second-floor balcony that stretched across the front of the house. Japanese maples, their leaves a brilliant crimson, flanked the curved stone steps leading to the front door. A three-car garage stood to the side, connected to the main house by a covered breezeway. Despite the large garage, a single BMW sat parked on the concrete driveway.

"One police unit," Rachel noted, pulling up beside the cruiser. "Either this is being kept very quiet, or something's off." She studied the scene through the windshield, her years of experience already cataloging the details. "No crime scene unit, no medical examiner's vehicle. Just one patrol car for a dead federal judge."

"The police did say they wanted to keep it quiet," Novak commented. "It's probably why they called the bureau for a singular murder."

"Might not be murder," she said. "Could be suicide for all we know...found in his car, in front of his house."

The BMW sat in the circular portion of the driveway, its metallic gray paint gleaming in the sunlight. At first glance, it could have been a scene from any ordinary day—a judge returning home from court, perhaps pausing to check his phone before heading inside. But Rachel knew better. Death had a way of making even the most normal scenes feel wrong, like a painting hung slightly off-center.

A heavysset officer emerged from the front door of the house, his movements deliberate as he made his way down the steps. His badge identified him as Officer Douglas, though his weathered face and graying hair suggested he'd worn it long enough to earn the informal title of "veteran." His uniform was pristine, every crease sharp enough to cut paper—the kind of officer who took pride in appearances.

"Agent Gift? Agent Novak?" He extended his hand, his grip firm but not challenging. "Thanks for coming out. Body's just as we found it—haven't touched a thing. Not in the car or inside. Had to talk the responding officers into backing off until you arrived."

Rachel retrieved a pair of latex gloves from the glove compartment of their car as Douglas shared this information. The subtle snap of rubber against skin seemed unnaturally loud in the quiet neighborhood.

"Who found him?" Rachel asked.

"His wife," Douglas replied, his voice softening. "She's at St. Mary's now. Doctor's got her sedated. She was in a weird state of shock...which makes sense, I guess. She found him like this after reporting him missing two days ago—it hit her pretty hard. Can't blame her. Coming out to check the mail and then all of a sudden finding him...dead and in his car. He shook his head, leaving the sentence unfinished.



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“But another car of his was found at the parking garage near his courthouse, right?” Novak asked. “That’s what I was told.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

Rachel approached the BMW, studying the scene before touching anything. The judge sat in the driver's seat, his head tilted slightly back against the headrest. If not for the unnatural stillness, he might have been taking a quick nap between appointments. His button-down shirt showed no signs of struggle. His silver hair was perfectly combed, his clean-shaven face relaxed, almost peaceful. There was a sport coat in the passenger seat, discarded in a crumpled ball.

"No signs of struggle," Novak observed, circling to the passenger side. His trained eye moved methodically over every surface. "Windows intact, paint unscratched. No scuff marks on the door handles or locks."

“Maybe someone forced him inside,” Rachel offered. “Though, if that’s the case, they were careful about it.”

"Too careful," Novak murmured.

Rachel opened the driver's door carefully, the familiar new-car smell mixing with something else—something subtle but wrong. Not decay, not yet, but the first whispers of death that only experienced investigators learned to recognize. She reached for the judge's pants pocket, finding his wallet, phone, and keys...exactly where Novak had said they'd be when he'd originally relayed the scant case details.

"Body temperature suggests less than twenty-four hours," she said, her gloved hands moving methodically over the judge's neck. She then continued a search of his clothing, checking for any signs of violence or resistance. The expensive suit was pristine, every button in place, every fold exactly where it should be. "No obvious signs of trauma, no defensive wounds on his hands."

Then she noticed it—a mark on his left wrist, barely visible beneath his shirt cuff. Gently pushing back the fabric, she revealed a pale band of skin, wider than what a watch would leave. The impression was fresh, suggesting whatever had made it had been removed recently.

"Novak, take a look at this."

Her partner leaned in through the passenger door, his flashlight illuminating the mark. "Looks like where someone might wear a watch over a long period of time, right?"

"Maybe," Rachel said. But her mind had skipped over the impression of a watch and was thinking instead about restraints.

"Nah, not a watch," Novak said. "Why leave his wallet and this expensive car, but take his watch? But why remove it just to leave him here? And why go through all this trouble just to stage a scene that looks like...nothing?"

"All good questions," Rachel said as she took a step back. She sat back on her heels, studying the interior. "Everything's too perfect. No scratches on the steering wheel from his rings, no scuff marks on the pedals from his shoes. This car's been detailed recently."

They spent the next hour going over every inch of the vehicle. Rachel documented the precise position of every item in the center console, every receipt in the cup

holders. She photographed the odometer reading, checked the gas gauge, even measured the tire pressure. In the trunk, she found the expected emergency kit, spare tire, and jack—all spotless, all perfectly arranged.

Novak worked with equal thoroughness on the exterior, photographing the vehicle from multiple angles, paying special attention to the tires and undercarriage. He collected trace evidence from the wheel wells and took samples from the exhaust pipe. But with each passing minute, the same pattern emerged: nothing was out of place, nothing was missing, and nothing provided any hint of what had happened to Judge Marcus Smith.

The house loomed behind them, its windows like dark eyes watching their futile investigation. The perfectly maintained flower beds and precisely trimmed shrubs seemed to mock them with their orderliness, as if nature itself was conspiring to hide whatever violence had occurred here. Even the air felt sterile, sanitized of any clues that might have helped them understand the Marcus Smith's final moments.

"No obvious signs of medical intervention," Rachel said finally, straightening up from her examination. Her back protested the movement—she'd been crouched over the body longer than she'd realized. "If this was suicide, he had help. Professional help. Someone who knew what they were doing."

Novak nodded, snapping one final photograph. "The wife might be able to fill in some blanks. If she's up for talking." He paused, looking back at the house. "Should we process the garage? Maybe the house?"

Rachel considered it, but something told her they wouldn't find anything there either. Whoever had done this was too methodical, too careful. She looked back over to officer Douglas and said, "Anything worth seeing in the house?"

"Not unless you want to feel broke and inadequate," he said with a humorless

laugh.He then shook his head and said, "Clean as a whistle.Nothing."

Rachel peeled off her gloves, watching as a slight breeze stirred the Japanese maples, sending a shower of red leaves across the driveway.Something about this scene felt familiar, but she couldn't quite place it.

"Officer Douglas," she called out.The older cop looked up from his phone where he was typing up notes."Make sure the ME and coroner know to contact us immediately if they find anything unusual.Anything at all.Even if it seems insignificant."

"Will do, Agent Gift.I'll personally make sure they understand the priority level here."

As they walked back to their vehicle, Rachel cast one last look at the BMW.Judge Smith sat there still, forever frozen in what appeared to be a moment of perfect normalcy.But Rachel had learned long ago that normalcy was often the most carefully crafted lie of all.Someone had gone to extraordinary lengths to make this death look unremarkable, and that in itself was remarkable.

Novak got behind the wheel with a perplexed look on his face."It feels weird, right?"

"Yeah, it really does."

"St. Mary's Hospital?"Novak asked.

"Seems like the next logical step," she said as he pulled away from the curb."Hopefully Mrs.Smith can help us answer a few questions."

The sedan wound its way back through Oak Ridge Estates, past more pristine lawns and magnificent homes.But Rachel barely noticed them now.Her mind was already racing ahead, trying to piece together the puzzle of a man who seemed to have died

without cause in a car that showed no signs of how he got there.

### CHAPTER THREE

The automatic doors of Metropolitan General Hospital slid open with a whisper, releasing a blast of air that carried the familiar blend of antiseptic and industrial cleaner. Rachel paused for a moment in the entrance, letting the sensation wash over her—to allow her body to take it in and then simply shed it off. She'd spent enough time in hospitals—both as an agent and as a patient—to recognize the particular cocktail of scents they used to mask the underlying hints of illness and mortality. It never quite worked; beneath the chemical clean, there was always something else, something human and vulnerable.

The lobby stretched before them, a study in institutional beige and muted blue. Early afternoon sunlight filtered through the tall windows, creating patterns on the polished floor that somehow made the space feel both larger and more confined. A group of elderly visitors huddled near a coffee cart, their whispered conversations creating a soft backdrop to the steady beep of distant monitors and the squeak of rubber-soled shoes on linoleum.

Rachel approached the front desk, Novak falling into step beside her. The receptionist looked up from her computer screen to greet them. Her name tag read "Marion."

"We're looking for Dana Smith," Rachel said, keeping her voice low and presenting her badge and ID as discreetly as she could. Even after all her time spent in hospitals—or perhaps because of it—she still felt the instinctive need to whisper in these spaces. "She was brought in earlier due to shock. Could you tell us where she's been taken?"

Marion's fingers moved across her keyboard with practiced efficiency. The sound of her acrylic nails against the keys seemed unnaturally loud in the hushed atmosphere. "Mrs. Smith is in a private observation room on the second floor. Room 214."

Rachel nodded her thanks, and she and Novak made their way toward the bank of elevators at the far end of the lobby.

As they walked, their footsteps echoed off the polished floors, joining the symphony of mechanical sounds that formed the hospital's constant background noise. A cleaning cart stood abandoned near a water fountain, its collection of supplies suggesting interrupted work. On the wall, a large piece of generic artwork depicted a peaceful beach scene that somehow managed to look more depressing than soothing. During her time in hospitals, she'd come to despise the muted, false cheer of such pictures, placed in far too many hospitals worldwide. Hey, you're sick or dying, they seemed to say. Check out this scenery you may never get to see again!

"Something's not adding up," Novak said as they waited for the elevator. He kept his voice low, though they were alone in the alcove. "A judge doesn't just vanish before turning up dead. If it was suicide—"

"It wasn't," Rachel cut in, perhaps more sharply than she'd intended. The elevator arrived with a soft ding, its doors opening to reveal an empty car that smelled faintly of ammonia. "Suicide victims don't typically disappear first. And if they do, they don't come back home to get revenge, you know? This feels...deliberate."

The thought sent her mind drifting to Cody Austin again. His methodical nature, his attention to detail, the way he'd always managed to stay just beyond her reach. She could almost see him planning something like this, taking satisfaction in the fear and confusion he'd create. She pushed the thought away with an effort. This wasn't about him. Not everything could be about him, no matter how much her instincts tried to

make the connection.

The elevator hummed as it carried them to the second floor, the sound making Rachel's teeth ache slightly. Or maybe that was just tension. She realized she was clenching her jaw and made a conscious effort to relax it.

The second floor was quieter than the lobby, the fluorescent lights casting a harsh glow over the empty hallway. A bulletin board near the elevator displayed various health awareness posters and employee notices, their corners curling slightly with age. The air here felt heavier somehow.

They followed the signs toward the observation rooms, their footsteps muffled by industrial carpet that had seen better days. A nurse hurried past them, head down, focused on a tablet in her hands. Through partially open doors, Rachel caught glimpses of life and death being held in precarious balance: monitors blinking steadily, IV bags swaying slightly, television screens flickering with barely audible voices coming from them.

Before they could reach Room 214, a nurse stepped into their path with the fluid efficiency of someone used to intercepting unwanted visitors. She was young, probably in her early thirties, with dark circles under her eyes and hair pulled back so tightly it looked painful. She positioned herself between them and the door, her body language professional but unmistakably protective.

"I'm sorry," she said, her expression genuinely apologetic despite the firmness in her tone. "Mrs. Smith isn't allowed visitors at the moment. She's in a catatonic state, and we're monitoring her for cardiac issues." Her eyes moved between them, assessing. "Are you family?"

Rachel reached for her credentials, the motion so practiced it was almost unconscious. "FBI," she said, showing her badge. "Special Agent Rachel Gift, and this



is Special Agent Novak. We're investigating her husband's death."

The nurse's posture stiffened slightly, almost imperceptibly, but Rachel caught it. After years of interviewing witnesses and suspects, she'd learned to read these tiny tales. "We've been instructed to direct all law enforcement inquiries to Judge Smith's judicial assistant," the nurse said. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a folded yellow sticky note, the creases suggesting it had been folded and unfolded several times already. "Here's the contact information."

Rachel took a photo of the note with her phone, studying the neat handwriting. Despite the contact information, this felt like the first dead end. She highly respected a grieving wife's privacy and emotional health, but she also knew, from an agent's perspective, that they were about to walk away from their best source of potential information.

"Thank you for your time," she said to the nurse, who was already moving to check on another patient, her shoes squeaking slightly against the floor. She quickly nodded to them with an almost apologetic frown on her face.

"You think this assistant is worth speaking to?" Novak asked.

"Better than nothing, I guess."

Novak shrugged and pressed the DOWN button as they once again came to the elevators. Rachel again allowed herself a moment to despise the place before shrugging it off and re-centering her mind on the case.

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The address from the sticky note led them to an imposing four-story building in one of the city's more affluent neighborhoods. The structure was all clean lines and tinted

windows, trying too hard to look important without the gravitas of an actual courthouse. Standing on the sidewalk, Rachel studied its facade. Everything about it spoke of careful curation: the manicured shrubs flanking the entrance, the gleaming brass handles on the heavy glass doors, even the way the afternoon sun reflected off the windows at just the right angle to suggest importance.

Inside, the lobby featured expensive-looking abstract art that somehow managed to say nothing at all, and a security desk staffed by a guard who barely glanced at their badges before waving them through. His indifference suggested either excellent training or complete apathy; Rachel wasn't sure which was more likely.

They took the stairs to the third floor, the sticky note having stated that the assistant kept his office in Room 303. As soon as they pushed through the fire door at the third floor, they encountered barely contained chaos. A man stood in the hallway, phone wedged between his ear and shoulder, arms full of folders that threatened to spill their contents across the floor at any moment. His tie was loosened, and a fine sheen of sweat glistened on his forehead. He somehow managed to look angry and out of his element at the same time.

"No, no, you don't understand," he was saying into the phone, his voice strained. "These need to be processed by next Tuesday. If not, we—" He caught sight of Rachel and Novak, his eyes dropping to Novak's badge and ID as he flashed them. "Listen, I have to go," the hectic-looking man said. "No, right now. Yes, now." He ended the call mid-protest from whoever was on the other end, not even bothering with a goodbye. Rachel wasn't even sure the call was actually over, as he'd simply straightened his head from his neck, the phone dropping to the top of the stack of folders he was carrying.

"Thank God," he said, shifting the weight of the folders. A few papers escaped despite his efforts, drifting to the floor like autumn leaves. "I've been waiting on law enforcement...though I wasn't expecting the FBI. Follow me, would you?"

Rachel and Novak shared a curious glance as the man turned and started walking in the other direction. Rachel picked up the fallen papers as they did so. The man led them down the hallway, introducing himself as Bob Pleskin between labored breaths.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:04 am*

"Ever since news of Judge Smith's death broke two hours ago, it's been absolute madness," Pleskin said. "All these cases need to be redistributed, and some of them are time-sensitive, and nobody seems to understand that the justice system doesn't just stop because—" He broke off as one of the folders started to slip. Rachel caught it before it could fall, the manila material rough against her fingers.

Pleskin shot her a grateful look as he deposited his burden onto a desk that was already overflowing with papers. The office they'd entered was clearly in transition, with boxes stacked in corners and post-it notes everywhere, creating a colorful constellation of reminders and deadlines. A half-empty coffee cup sat forgotten on a windowsill, a lipstick stain on its rim suggesting it belonged to someone else. The room smelled of paper and toner and the particular brand of desperation that came with trying to maintain order in the face of chaos.

"We just need a few moments to ask about Judge Smith," Novak said.

"What do you need to know?" Pleskin asked, running a hand through his already disheveled hair. He remained standing, his body language suggesting he was ready to bolt for the next crisis at any moment.

"What kind of man was Judge Smith?" Rachel asked, deliberately keeping her tone casual. "Both personally and professionally?"

Pleskin considered this, absently straightening one of the stacks of folders. His hands seemed unable to stay still, constantly organizing, arranging, as if he could create order through sheer repetitive motion. "He was...precise. Some people called him rigid, but that wasn't quite right. He believed in the letter of the law. Believed in it

absolutely. Which some saw as honorable while others...well, not so much."

"Meaning he wasn't interested in making exceptions?" Rachel pressed.

"He used to say that exceptions were how justice became a privilege. That if you bent the rules for one person, you had to bend them for everyone, and then they weren't rules anymore." Pleskin's hands kept moving as he talked, organizing, straightening, as if he couldn't bear to be still. A paper clip skittered off the desk and landed with a tiny ping on the floor. Neither of them moved to pick it up. "But he wasn't cruel about it. He'd explain his reasoning to people, make sure they understood why he ruled the way he did. Sometimes they'd leave his courtroom angry, but they always knew exactly why he'd ruled the way he had."

The way he rattled all of this off made Rachel think that Bob Pleskin had greatly cared for Judge Smith. But in the craziness of work that had occurred after the news of his death had come through the building, he was choosing to focus on work rather than grief. She wondered how much longer it would be before he escaped to the men's room to have good, long cry.

"Did that approach earn him any enemies?" Rachel watched Pleskin's face carefully. "Any high-profile cases that might have made someone angry enough to want revenge?"

Pleskin shook his head, the motion slightly too quick to be entirely convincing. "I've been wondering that exact same thing. But there's nothing...nothing major, anyway. We'd get the occasional angry phone call or letter, usually over traffic violations or minor civil disputes. There was one case involving a restraining order against an abusive uncle that got a bit heated, but even that..." He trailed off, distracted by a paper that had slipped to the floor. This time he did bend to retrieve it, using the motion to break eye contact.

"Can you tell us more about—" Rachel started, but her phone interrupted with a sharp ring. The screen showed the saved number of the coroner's office.

"Wow, that was fast," she said. "I'm sorry. Excuse me, Mr. Pleskin."

"Of course."

She answered the call with a bit of hope in her voice. "You've got something already?"

"Well, some of these findings didn't take much searching," came the response, something in the tone making Rachel's stomach tighten. "Yes, we have a few preliminary findings. I can give them to you over the phone, but you may want to see this for yourself."

"Understood. Give us twenty minutes."

She ended the call and turned to Pleskin, also eyeing Novak at the same time. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Pleskin. We'll be in touch if we have any other questions."

"Please do. I'm happy to help however I can."

As they left the office, Rachel could hear Pleskin already on another call, his voice rising with barely contained frustration as he tried to explain something about filing deadlines to someone who clearly wasn't grasping the urgency. The sound followed them down the hallway, a soundtrack to the controlled collapse of one man's ordered world.

"That was the coroner," Rachel said.

"What did they find?"

“I don’t know.He said it’s something we probably need to see for ourselves.”

“That sounds...ominous,” Novak said.

Rachel nodded, her mind already racing ahead to what they might learn.They descended the stairs in silence, and Rachel could feel the case starting to take shape.For most cases, she could usually tell when things were going to truly start escalating...and she felt a bit of that as they reached the lobby, passing by the lackadaisical security guard again.

But she also knew that the escalation of a case didn’t necessarily mean things would go their way.In fact, more often than not, the opposite tended to be true.And unless they started hunting down some real answers, the case could easily get away from them.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Rachel pulled her coat tighter as she and Novak crossed the parking lot of the county coroner's office.December had arrived with a vengeance, bringing crystalline skies and bitter winds that bit through clothing no matter how many layers one wore.The morning sun cast long shadows across the frost-covered pavement, creating a deceptively picturesque scene that seemed almost obscene given their destination.

"Strange weather for viewing a dead body," Novak remarked, his breath visible in the cold air."Almost too nice, you know."

Rachel nodded, understanding exactly what he meant.She appreciated the sentimentality of it, but she thought the cold air was somehow fitting for what they were about to do.Also, she did have to admit that there was something unsettling about the cheerfulness of the morning—like a grinning mask hiding something sinister beneath.They reached the entrance, and Rachel noticed her reflection in the

glass doors of the entrance to the building: tired eyes, hair whipped by the wind, and a tension in her jaw she hadn't realized was there.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:04 am*

The reception area was stark and clinical, populated only by an older woman behind a high counter who barely glanced up from her computer screen as they approached. The chemical smell that permeated all medical facilities seemed especially potent here, tinged with something else Rachel had learned to recognize over the years—the lingering trace of death that no amount of sanitizer could quite mask.

Novak cleared his throat. "Agents Novak and Gift, FBI. We're here about Judge Smith."

The receptionist nodded, her face remaining impassive. "Dr. Meyers is expecting you. Second exam room on the right." She pressed a button, and the security door behind her and to the right buzzed open.

The corridor beyond stretched out before them, its fluorescent lights casting a harsh glow that made the cream-colored walls appear sickly. The space was sickeningly familiar. How many times had she walked this path? How many bodies had she viewed in these rooms? Too many to count, for sure, yet each one remained etched in her memory.

They reached the second door, and Novak rapped his knuckles against it. The sound seemed too loud in the quiet hallway. Moments later, the door opened to reveal Dr. Meyers, a man Rachel recognized from previous cases. Another face she'd passed by countless times in the course of her career but hadn't gotten to properly know. Meyers had to be pushing sixty now, his salt-and-pepper hair more salt than pepper these days, but his eyes remained sharp behind wire-rimmed glasses. Deep lines around his mouth suggested someone who had spent too many years frowning

over bodies, searching for answers in death.

Rachel couldn't help herself. "So what all have you learned in the whopping two hours that you've had the body?" she asked with a bit of dark humor.

Meyers' mouth twitched in what might have been amusement. "Well, first of all, it's been closer to three hours. And I've learned more than you might think, Agent Gift." He gestured them inside. "Though not as much as I'd like."

The examination room was brightly lit, making the stainless steel surfaces gleam. Judge Marcus Smith lay on the central table, his body covered by a white sheet up to the chest. In death, his face appeared waxy and slack, nothing like the stern-faced man Rachel had seen in photographs. The fluorescent lights were unforgiving, highlighting every discoloration, every mark on his skin.

"Once we removed his clothing, the signs of struggle became apparent," Meyers said, pulling back the sheet to reveal the judge's torso. Two purple-black bruises mottled his shoulders and upper arms. These indicate he was forcibly restrained, probably during the initial abduction."

Rachel leaned in closer, studying the patterns of bruising. "Consistent with someone grabbing him from behind?"

"That would be my assessment," Meyers confirmed. He gently lifted the judge's right arm, turning it to expose the inner elbow. "But this is what I found most interesting."

A large, ugly bruise spread across the crook of the arm, centered around a clear puncture mark. The skin around it was swollen and discolored, spreading outward like a malevolent flower.

"Is that an injection site?" Novak asked, stepping closer.

Meyers nodded."Inserted with considerable haste and little expertise.Whoever did this wasn't particularly skilled with needlework.They missed the vein at least once before getting it right.And from the nature of the bruise, I don't think it was just a single shot.I think there was an IV inserted here."

Rachel studied the injection site, her mind working through the implications."What did the preliminary tox screen show?"

"Sedatives.High levels of them," Meyers confirmed, reaching for a clipboard."Primarily benzodiazepines, though we're still working to identify the exact cocktail.Whatever it was, it was strong enough to keep him completely incapacitated."

"But not meant to kill him," Rachel said slowly, the pieces beginning to fall into place."The cardiac arrest wasn't planned....right?"

"Yes, that would be a hard thing to plan for."

"So our perp...he wanted to keep Judge Smith alive but sedated."

"What makes you so sure?"Novak asked, his brow furrowed.

Rachel gestured to the body."Look at the care that was taken, despite the amateur IV work.The judge was kept clean, no signs of intentional injury beyond the initial abduction.Even the injection site, while badly done, shows repeated attempts to get it right.This wasn't someone who wanted him dead—at least not quickly.They wanted him helpless, imprisoned in his own body.Plus, if you wanted to kill someone, you'd use something stronger than benzodiazepines."

"But they miscalculated, it seems," Meyers said."Either they didn't know enough about the drugs they were using, or they didn't account for some underlying health

condition. The judge's heart gave out under the strain. The sedative levels in his system were high but not immediately lethal. Death appears to have occurred due to cardiac arrest brought on by prolonged sedation and stress."

Novak circled the table slowly, his eyes scanning the body. "So we're looking for someone with a grudge against Judge Smith. Someone who wanted him to suffer but not necessarily die. Any ideas how many people that might cover?"

"He was on the bench for over twenty years," Rachel said grimly. "Could be hundreds." She leaned closer to the injection site again, not liking the theories it started to paint in her mind.

Meyers continued his examination, pointing out other details: slight abrasions on the wrists suggesting restraints, minor dehydration consistent with inadequate IV fluids, early signs of pressure sores indicating the judge had been kept immobile for at least a few days.

Each new detail painted a clearer picture, but one that raised more questions than answers. This wasn't a simple revenge killing. The level of planning, the specific method of incapacitation, the careful maintenance of the victim—it all spoke to something more complex, more personal.

"We'll need the full tox screen as soon as possible," Rachel said, straightening up. "Especially the exact makeup of the sedatives used. That might help us narrow down where they came from."

Meyers nodded. "Should have it within twenty-four hours... though I don't know that it's going to be any different than the preliminary information. I'll also have a more detailed report on the tissue damage around the injection site. Might be able to tell you more about the type of equipment used."

“Thanks, Dr.Meyers,” Rachel said as she and Novak made their way back to the door.

As they prepared to leave, Rachel took one final look at Judge Smith's body.In life, he had wielded enormous power, his decisions affecting countless lives.Now he lay here, reduced to evidence, his death a puzzle for them to solve.But something about this case felt different, felt personal in a way she couldn't quite define.

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:04 am*

The sunlight seemed even brighter when they emerged from the building, almost painful after the artificial lighting and the pallor of death inside. Rachel squinted against it, her mind still in that sterile room with its steel tables and silent occupant.

"What are you thinking?" Novak asked as they walked back to their car.

"I honestly don't know yet," Rachel said. "But it's pretty clear that this case is going to be go a bit deeper than we'd originally thought."

The December wind whipped around them, the chill overriding the surprisingly bright sun. As they drove away from the coroner's office, Rachel looked out to the streets, thinking it over. A judge with such a history... finding a single person that might hold a grudge against him was going to be a monumental task. She just hoped they had time to figure out some way to narrow the field down before their killer had time to fully escape.

Or worse, to attack again.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The door creaked open slowly, darkness from the hallway spilling into the wood-paneled room like ink. He paused in the doorway, letting his eyes adjust to the dim interior. The small lamp on the battered dresser cast weak shadows across the walls, making the water stains in the corners look like spreading decay. The room seemed different without the judge in it. Those old, oppressive wooden panels from the seventies seemed much more expansive now, as if the room was an old, massive chamber rather than a small, confined space.

The wood-paneled walls seemed to close in around him as he made his final checks. The room was perfect in its awful simplicity. No decorations to distract from the purpose. No comfort beyond the basics needed to keep his guests alive—for as long as he chose to do so. The water stains in the corners had spread over decades, marking time like rings in a tree, testament to all the suffering these walls had witnessed.

He looked to the second bed in the room (the first having, until recently, contained Judge Smith) and stared for a moment at the woman lying in it. Dr. Patricia Walsh lay motionless on the narrow bed against the far wall, her chest rising and falling in the slow rhythm of drug-induced sleep. Her face was slack and pale, the opposite of the bright and fierce expressions he'd seen on her in the past. Dark circles had formed under her eyes, matching the bruises on her wrists where the restraints held her in place.

He moved closer, his footsteps silent on the thin carpet. The IV stand beside her bed held two bags—one clear, one milky white. Both were necessary. Both had to be perfectly calibrated. He wouldn't make the same mistake he'd made with the judge. That failure still burned in his gut like acid, making his hands shake slightly as he checked the drip rates.

"You'll have to forgive my attention to detail, Doctor," he whispered, though he knew she couldn't hear him. She was pretty much out cold. "But after what happened with Judge Smith...well, we can't have any more accidents, can we?"

The mention of Smith made his jaw clench even when it was from his own voice. He hadn't meant for the judge to die so soon. It had been sloppy—a miscalculation in the dosage, perhaps, or maybe the old man's heart had been weaker than expected. Either way, the judge hadn't suffered long enough. He hadn't truly understood what it felt like to be trapped inside his own body, aware but helpless. And that had been the goal all along.

He adjusted the IV flow with practiced precision. Dr. Walsh would need to stay under while he was away. He had preparations to make, another guest to arrange for. Someone to take Smith's place in his carefully orchestrated demonstration of justice. And he already had a fitting candidate.

The television's blank screen caught his reflection as he passed by, and he studied himself in its dark mirror. He looked ordinary—deliberately so. The kind of man who could walk into a hospital or courthouse without drawing a second glance. The sort of person who could knock on someone's door and be invited in without hesitation. It was one of his greatest gifts, this ability to be forgettable.

But there was something else in his reflection now, something in his eyes that he usually kept hidden. A darkness that had been growing since his mother had been confined to that hospital bed, since certain people had decided her fate with their laws and their ethics and their professional opinions.

He turned away from his muted, darkened reflection and began his methodical check of the room. The wood paneling absorbed sound well—he'd chosen this house partly for that reason. The old television didn't work. It hadn't since he'd been a child. But it had been here for his mother's entire life, and he'd be damned if he would move it or change the room in any way at all. The dresser held supplies: extra tubing, fresh bags of solution, the carefully measured medications that kept Patricia Walsh hovering between consciousness and oblivion. That was the only change he'd made to the room.

Everything in the dresser was organized, everything in the room controlled. Or so he'd thought; the loss of Smith still bothered him, that loss of control. He prided himself on precision, on careful planning. The judge's death felt like a personal failure, a crack in his otherwise perfect execution. Judge Smith's death had been regrettable, but it hadn't stopped anything. If anything, it had strengthened his resolve. These people needed to understand what they had done. Needed to feel the helplessness, the trapped



awareness, the slow tide of despair that came with being imprisoned in one's own body.

He reached out and touched Dr. Walsh's hand. It was cool, but not too cool. Her nail beds still showed good color. Her breathing remained steady and even. All vital signs are exactly where they should be.

"You'll have company soon," he murmured, straightening her blanket with almost tender care.

The chemical smell seemed stronger now, or maybe he was just more aware of it. It reminded him of his mother's room, of antiseptic and despair and machines that breathed for someone who wanted to stop breathing. He wondered if the stupid IV was somehow giving it off. Or maybe he was just imagining it, his brain playing tricks on him. His mother had been trapped in that sterile hell while these people—this woman, the judge, all of them—had decided she needed to stay there. That her wishes didn't matter. That his wishes didn't matter.

He checked his watch. He had work to do. Another guilty party to collect, another lesson to teach. He'd already chosen the next one, had studied their habits, their schedule, their vulnerabilities. It would be easier this time. Cleaner. No mistakes.

He moved toward the door, his shadow stretching long across the floor. The lamp's weak light caught the IV bags, making them glow like ghost-light. Dr. Walsh didn't stir as he paused in the doorway for one final look.

The room was exactly as it should be. Exactly as it had been for Judge Smith. Exactly as it would be for the others. A place of contemplation. Of understanding. And if he was being truly honest and transparent... a place of revenge.

The door closed behind him with a soft click, leaving Dr. Walsh alone in her chemical

sleep, surrounded by dark wood and darker purpose. In a few hours, he would return with another guest. Another participant in his demonstration of consequence.

The house creaked around him as he climbed the stairs to the main floor. Old houses had such voices, he thought. They spoke of secrets kept and lives that had been lost. This one had been speaking to him for years, ever since he'd first learned to walk. He knew it intimately...how its cramped spaces and aged walls could serve his purpose.

He emerged into the normal world, where sunlight streamed through windows and the air was free of chemical taint. Where he was just another unremarkable man going about his unremarkable business. No one who passed him on the street would guess what lay below. No one would see the darkness behind his eyes or understand the righteousness of his cause.

His car waited in the driveway, as ordinary as he was. He started the car, checking his reflection in the rearview mirror. The darkness in his eyes was hidden now, tucked away behind the mask of normalcy he wore so well. He was just another face in the crowd. Another shadow is moving through the world.

But below, in that old room—the same room where, not too long ago he had come to the realization that he was going to lose his mother, Dr. Patricia Walsh slept on. And soon, very soon, she would have company in her contemplation of consequences.

He pulled out of the driveway, leaving the old house and its secrets behind. There was work to be done. Lessons to be taught.

And he was nothing if not thorough in his work.

### CHAPTER SIX

Rachel drummed her fingers against her desk, staring at the empty search field on her monitor. She and Novak had been back at headquarters for about twenty minutes now, and she already felt like this case was getting away from them. Looking through court records for any red flags as to who might have had it out for Judge Smith was already daunting and she feared that getting bogged down in research might be the worst thing possible.

As she did her best to keep herself motivated, her eyes quickly darted to a picture of Paige and Grandma Tate sitting on the far side of her desk. They were flying kites out at Bell Isle, their smiles bright and carefree. Something twisted in her chest—a familiar guilt she'd been carrying since returning to full-time work.

Her gaze drifted to another photo, this one older, showing Paige and Peter outside on a snowy day, Paige had been five and Peter had been...well, things had still been good between them. It was hard to think of him now...not just as her ex-husband but as her deceased ex-husband...another victim of Alex Lynch after his escape from prison. But looking at that picture also reminded her of a time before the cancer, before Alex Lynch and Alice Denbrough, before everything changed. Sometimes she missed those simpler days, when the hardest part of balancing work and home life was making sure she had enough energy left to help Paige with homework after a long day.

"You still with me, Gift?" Novak's voice cut through her thoughts. He sat perched on the edge of her desk, his phone on speaker between them. He wasn't Jack—would never be Jack—but she had to admit he was growing on her. He had good instincts,

even if he sometimes tried too hard to prove himself.

"Yeah, sorry." Rachel straightened in her chair, forcing her attention back to the case. As of about five minutes ago, Novak had Bob Pleskin on the line, trying to get him to help in narrowing down their search. He'd gone quiet for a moment as he'd not only gone looking through the database on his end, but also continued to field calls in Judge Smith's absence.

"You still there, Mr. Pleskin?" Novak asked.

"Yeah. And I'm doing what you asked...focusing on cases from the past five years. Anything involving sedatives, medical malpractice, or kidnapping." Static crackled through the speaker as Bob Pleskin shuffled papers on his end. "Looking at cases involving sedatives or kidnapping certainly narrows it down," he went on, "but the judge presided over hundreds of cases in that timeframe. This could take—" He broke off suddenly.

"What is it?" Rachel asked. "You got something?"

"Hot damn, yeah, I think I do. I think I might have one for you. Hold on...let me email this file to you. Where should I send it?"

Rachel recited her bureau email address and just a handful of seconds later, the email notification popped up on her laptop screen. But she hesitated before opening it. Cases like this always meant long hours, missed dinners, bedtime stories read over FaceTime instead of in person. She'd promised herself—promised Jack and Paige—that things would be different this time around. Part-time work had been an option, but she knew what that meant: fewer major cases, less chance to make a real difference. The cancer and recovery had already stolen enough time from her career.

She thought about the time she'd spent volunteering at the hospice, about Scarlett and

all the others she'd watched fight the good fight. She'd told herself that returning to work full-time was about justice, about making the world safer. But sometimes, in quiet moments like this, she wondered if she was just running from death, trying to outpace the shadows that still haunted her. She supposed that could be the case because she always felt like she was running faster when she was working a case rather than sitting at home—even if she was spending quality time with Paige.

“You good?” Novak asked her, clearly not understanding why she’d not yet opened the email.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Sorry...”

She opened the email and leaned over a bit as Novak squeezed in look over her shoulder as she opened the attachment. She could smell his coffee breath—third cup of the day, at least. Another thing that was different from working with Jack, who had always preferred tea. It was small things like this that often made her miss working with Jack, and they often took her by surprise.

The case file detailed a malpractice suit against Dr. Gregory Porter, an anesthesiologist at Memorial Hospital. According to the file, six months ago, Porter had been accused of negligence during a routine appendectomy. The patient, a twelve-year-old boy named Joseph Chen, had suffered severe complications due to improper dosing of anesthesia. The boy had survived but sustained permanent neurological damage.

"Judge Smith's ruling was particularly harsh," Pleskin explained to them through the speaker. "He didn't just find Porter liable—he recommended a full review of all his recent cases and suggested his license be suspended pending investigation."

Rachel scrolled through the documents, the story becoming a bit more dramatic as she read Porter's testimony. He'd blamed equipment malfunction, claimed the dosing

computer had malfunctioned, but the evidence heavily suggested he'd been drinking before the surgery. The strongest bit of proof was that a nurse had reported smelling alcohol on his breath, but he'd intimidated her into staying quiet initially.

"The nurse who reported him," Rachel said, scanning the document. "Sarah Jensen, it says here. What happened to her?"

"Transferred to another hospital," Pleskin replied. "Porter made her life hell before he was fired. Spread rumors about her competency, tried to get her fired. A real piece of work."

Rachel felt a familiar anger burning in her chest. She'd seen it too many times—men like Porter, so convinced of their own superiority that they viewed any criticism as a personal attack. The type who would rather destroy someone else's career than admit their own mistakes.

"It was the start of a spectacular downward spiral," Pleskin continued. "After that, Porter lost his job at Memorial, couldn't get hired anywhere else. Started self-medicating with stolen hospital supplies. Last month, the medical board permanently revoked his license."

Novak met Rachel's gaze, and she saw her own thoughts reflected in his eyes. A medical professional with access to sedatives, a personal grudge against the judge, and nothing left to lose—it fit. Maybe too perfectly, a voice whispered in the back of her mind.

Regardless, Rachel felt the familiar surge of adrenaline that came with a solid lead, coupled with a wave of resignation. She glanced at her phone—4:07 PM. Paige would have just gotten home and would be starting homework soon, and Jack was supposed to be making his signature lasagna tonight. In a strange flash of normalcy and nostalgia, she could recall picking up fresh basil for him when she went to the

grocery store over the weekend. The grocery store bag was still sitting in her car, probably wilting in the heat.

"I'm running his information through our database now," Novak said, fingers flying across his laptop keyboard. "His last listed address is in Oakwood Heights."

"Maybe try him there, then," Bob said. "According to everything I know, it's not like he's going to be at work right now."

"Thanks, Bob," Rachel said, reaching for the phone. "We'll keep you posted."

As they headed for the elevator, Novak punched the address into his phone. At the same time, Rachel pulled out her phone to call Jack. Her thumb hovered over his name for a moment before she tucked the phone away. Better to wait until they checked out Porter's room. It would probably be another dead end, and then she could head home, spend some time with Paige, maybe still salvage part of the evening and enjoy dinner with her family.

But deep down, Rachel knew better. The way this case was unfolding—the layers they had only just started to peel back and the medical knowledge required for the sedation—it all pointed to someone with a grudge. Someone like Porter, perhaps.

The elevator doors closed with a soft ding, and Rachel watched the floor numbers tick down. She thought about the photos of Joseph Chen in the case file—a bright-eyed kid in a baseball uniform, then later in a wheelchair, his face slack and unresponsive. She thought about Judge Smith's body, found posed in his own car as if sleeping. And she thought about Paige waiting at home, probably already wondering why her mother was late again.

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:04 am*

Or maybe she's used to it by now that she really doesn't give a shit, Rachel thought.

"You okay?" Novak asked quietly.

Rachel nodded, squaring her shoulders. "Let's go find Porter."

The elevator reached the parking garage, its doors opening to darkness. As they walked to the car, Rachel couldn't shake the feeling that they were missing something obvious. Porter fit—almost too perfectly. Like a puzzle piece that looked right at first glance but left tiny gaps around the edges.

She thought about all the cases she'd worked before the cancer, all the times her instincts had told her something was off. Those instincts had saved her life more than once. But they'd also kept her at work late into the night, missing soccer games and dance recitals, telling herself that one more hour might crack the case.

She was falling back into the trap. She could deny it all she wanted, but it was true. And oddly enough, it made her angry at Porter. Porter—guilty or not—was the reason she'd be likely to miss dinner with her family tonight. It was an immature way to feel, but there it was plain and simple.

As they pulled out into the fading daylight, Rachel pushed thoughts of home to the back of her mind. This was the job—the job she'd fought so hard to return to, the job that had helped give her purpose during her darkest days.

And somewhere out there, a killer was lurking about, feeling like they'd somehow gotten away with it.



Nope,Rachel said as Novak headed for Gregory Porter's address.Not on my watch.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across Maple Grove, a middle-class neighborhood that had seen better days.Rachel sat in the passenger seat while Novak guided the Bureau sedan past rows of 1970s ranches and split-levels, their aging facades telling stories of deferred maintenance and underwater mortgages.Dead leaves skittered across browning lawns, dancing in the chill October breeze that carried winter's first whispers.It seemed like an odd neighborhood for a former doctor to live in, though it made a bit more sense as they actually arrived at Porter's home.

"Number 2347," Novak said, checking his phone."Should be coming up on the right."

Rachel slowed as they approached the Porter residence.Like its neighbors, the house bore an ancient look but his, at least, has been well-tended to.It was obviously one of the nicer homes in the neighborhood.A bare wrap-around porch seemed to make it stand out more than the other homes surrounding it.A few patches of determined chrysanthemums fought for survival in the flowerbed by the porch stairs, their purple and bronze blooms nodding in the cold wind.

Novak parked the car along the curb even though there was a driveway that led to a single-car garage.When he parked, they both looked to the house expectantly."Maybe this will be it," Novak said hopefully.

"It?"Rachel asked.

"This visit that wraps this case up."

Rachel shrugged, but she was already starting to doubt it.

They made their way up the walkway, a few fallen leaves crunching beneath their feet. The wind picked up, carrying with it the sharp bite of approaching evening. Rachel pulled her jacket tighter and pressed the doorbell. Through the frosted glass panels flanking the door, she caught movement—a shadow approaching with measured steps.

The door opened with a protesting creak, revealing a woman in her early fifties. Her ash-blonde hair was pulled back in a severe bun, and despite the casual sweater and jeans she wore, something in her bearing suggested country club membership and charity galas.

"Can I help you?" Her voice carried the clipped precision of someone accustomed to being listened to.

Rachel displayed her credentials. "I'm Special Agent Rachel Gift with the FBI, and this is Special Agent Novak. We're looking for Dr. Gregory Porter."

"I'm Madeline Porter." She stepped onto the porch, pulling the door firmly closed behind her. In doing so, she made it quite clear that she would not be inviting them inside, despite the cold weather. "Gregory isn't home."

The woman's posture was a study in defensive body language—arms crossed, weight shifted away from them, chin slightly elevated. Rachel had interviewed enough reluctant witnesses to recognize the signs of someone preparing to stonewall.

"When do you expect him back?" Novak asked.

Madeline's perfectly manicured fingers drummed against her arm. "I'm not entirely sure. His schedule has been...irregular lately."

It was apparent to Rachel that the woman was lying. The question, of course, was

what was she lying about?

"Mrs.Porter," Rachel said, noting how the woman's jaw tightened at the formal address, "it's quite chilly out here.Perhaps we could continue this conversation inside?"

"I prefer not to have visitors in the house right now."Madeline's smile was brittle as old china."I'm in the middle of some cleaning."

Through the window beside the door, Rachel caught glimpses of an immaculate living room.No cleaning supplies in sight, no vacuum cleaner, not even a duster.The lie was as transparent as the glass she was peering through.

A gust of wind rattled the dying leaves of a nearby maple, sending a shower of orange and red spiraling down around them.Madeline shivered but made no move to invite them in.

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Rachel decided to change tactics."Mrs.Porter, I'll be direct with you.We're investigating a murder, and your husband's name has come up in connection with the case."

The color drained from Madeline's face.For a moment, her carefully maintained facade cracked, revealing something raw and frightened underneath.She swayed slightly, one hand reaching out to steady herself against the door frame.

"A murder?"The word came out as barely more than a whisper."That's impossible.Gregory couldn't—" She stopped, drew a deep breath, and seemed to come to a decision.She stood straight, going for a look of defiance that, instead, came off as sheer confusion."Fine..." she hissed.

"What is it, Mrs.Porter?"Novak asked.

"Gregory has been in rehab for the past two weeks.Following a suicide attempt."She still tried to look as if she was mad and in charge, but the pain and shame in her eyes was too plain to see.The admission hung in the air between them, heavy as the approaching storm clouds.Rachel exchanged a quick glance with Novak before turning back to Madeline.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Rachel said softly."Would you mind telling us what led to this?"

Madeline laughed, a harsh, bitter sound that seemed to surprise even her.She looked back to the door as if she may have changed her mind about allowing them in but seemed to decide against it."What led to it?Everything.Nothing."She wrapped her

arms tighter around herself, as if trying to hold something in. "Do you know what it's like to watch someone you love destroy themselves piece by piece?"

She didn't wait for an answer. "Gregory was brilliant. One of the best anesthesiologists in the state. We had everything—the practice, the house in the Hamptons, private schools for the kids." She frowned and lightly stamped her foot on the porch. "That's why we stayed in this house. It's nice enough, sure, but Gregory always preferred to spend his money elsewhere. We had a good life, a fun and exciting life. Then came the mistakes. Small ones at first, barely noticeable. He'd forget to document a dosage on his forms at work, show up late for procedures, snap at the nurses."

"Was he drinking then, as well?" Rachel asked.

"Yes, but not in a...not excessively. The heavy drinking started after he lost his license. Just a glass of wine with dinner, then a bottle, then whatever he could get his hands on. When that wasn't enough, he...he got stupid. Almost overnight, it's as if he decided to just throw everything away. Getting drunk off his ass wasn't good enough anymore... he turned to cocaine." She spat the word like poison. "Said it helped him focus, and that it would help him figure out how to get his license back. Instead, it took everything we had left."

Rachel thought of the neighborhood around them, the aging houses and tired dreams. How many similar stories played out behind those windows?

"A little more than two weeks ago, I found him in his study." Madeline's voice had gone flat, emotionless. "He'd taken a mixture of alcohol and pills. If I'd been ten minutes later..." She shook her head. "The next morning, he admitted that he'd tried to kill himself. So I gave him no choice...I drove him to Riverside Recovery Center. He's been there ever since."

"We'll need to verify his presence there," Novak said, his tone professional but

gentle."For the timeframe of our investigation."

Something flickered across Madeline's face—annoyance, perhaps, or fear. But she nodded. "Riverside is about fifteen minutes north of the city, just off Highway 23. They can confirm he hasn't left the grounds since his admission. If there's a murder or some other sort of sordid activity you're trying to pin on him, that should be more than enough to prove his innocence."

The true, unblemished anger was back in her voice now and when she reached back for the doorknob, Rachel knew the conversation was over.

"Thank you, Mrs. Porter," Rachel said. "We appreciate your candor."

Madeline's mask of polite distance slipped back into place. "If that's all?"

They thanked her and turned to leave. As they reached the car, the porch light clicked on, casting their shadows long across the driveway. Rachel glanced back to see Madeline still standing in the doorway, a lonely figure framed by warm light, watching them with unreadable eyes.

The car doors shut with hollow thuds. Rachel sat for a moment as Novak slid behind the steering wheel, processing what they'd learned.

"Well," Novak said as he started the engine. "That gives Porter a pretty solid alibi, assuming it checks out."

Rachel nodded slowly. "Maybe too solid."

"You think she's lying?"

"I think she's terrified," Rachel replied, starting the engine. "The question is: of what?"

“Well, her husband did try to kill himself after they essentially lost everything she thought of as good in her life. Maybe she’s wondering what else might be coming. Maybe she thinks he might have done some other awful thing.”

They backed out of the driveway and pulled away from the curb, the Porter house growing smaller in the rearview mirror. The neighborhood felt different as they drove away, its quiet streets and modest homes holding secrets that seemed darker than they had just an hour before. And as Rachel now understood that she would absolutely miss dinner with her family, she also felt the tug of this case, growing larger ahead of her and demanding her full attention.

It felt too much like the past, reminding her of promises she’d broken time and time again. But this was yet another thought she had to tuck away for later consideration. Right now, they had a killer to find.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

When Rachel ended the call to the rehab facility, she slipped her phone into her jacket pocket and looked straight ahead. They’d just barely managed to miss the rush hour traffic along the interstate, which was a blessing in this part of the city. Through the windshield, little specks of cold, winter rain had started to fall, blurring the world beyond.

"They know we're on the way and are going to make sure Porter is ready to receive visitors when we get there," she told Novak. "They did mention that because of the sensitive nature of our visit, one of his therapists will have to be present."

She watched her partner's profile as he concentrated on the road. After months of working together, she was finally starting to read his subtle expressions – the slight tightening around his eyes that suggested he shared her frustration with their progress on the case. What had felt like it might be a quick one-and-done sort of case when it

was assigned to them just seven hours ago now looked like it was going to be a maze of sorts.



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Novak drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, a habit she'd noticed emerged when he was processing information. "And if Porter's been there the whole time..."

"Then we're back to square one," Rachel finished, voicing the fear that had been gnawing at her since they'd discovered Porter's whereabouts. "We'll have to dig through Smith's case files again, see what other disgruntled defendants might have had reason to want him dead." The thought settled like lead in her stomach. More files. More dead ends. More time for their killer to get away.

The silence in the car grew heavy with shared dread at the prospect of starting over. Rachel found herself thinking of Jack, probably on his way home right now—if not already there. He would have known exactly what to say to break this tension. Novak was good at his job, but he didn't yet have that intuitive understanding of when she needed a moment of levity to counter the darkness of their work.

The rehab facility materialized through the sprinkling rain like a mirage – a sprawling Tudor-style mansion set back from the road by expansive, manicured grounds. Even through the dismal weather, Rachel could see the meticulous care given to the landscaping. Japanese maples, their leaves brilliant crimson despite the gray afternoon, lined the circular drive. Carefully shaped topiary created living sculptures between beds of late-blooming chrysanthemums. Stone pathways wound through the gardens, disappearing around corners that promised peaceful meditation spots and hidden fountains.

The building itself rose before them like something from a British period drama – all steep gables and mullioned windows, with ivy climbing the aged brick in artfully controlled patterns.

"Are all rehab places this nice?" Novak asked.

"I'm not sure, actually. But I guess it makes sense to provide a peaceful, serene place if you're trying to help people overcome their addictions."

"Maybe. But this place makes me feel like I'm about to go have a hot stone massage or something."

Rachel shot him a sharp look, but she had to admit the facility looked more like a luxury resort than a rehabilitation center. The entrance featured soaring stone archways and gleaming brass fixtures that someone obviously polished daily. A series of glass doors offered glimpses of the lobby beyond, where warm light spilled from ornate sconces onto rich wood paneling.

They parked in a visitor spot near the front entrance and hurried through the cold rain to the doors.

Inside, the lobby ceiling stretched two stories high, dominated by a massive crystal chandelier that cast rainbow prisms across the marble floors below. Comfortable-looking leather chairs were arranged in intimate groupings around carved wooden coffee tables, each holding fresh flower arrangements that perfumed the air. The overall effect was one of understated wealth and privilege – the kind of place where affluent families could send their troubled members without having to admit they were really sending them to rehab.

A man was already waiting for them at the reception desk – trim, well-dressed in dark pants, a button-down shirt, and a crisp tie. Rachel guessed him to be maybe forty years old with prematurely graying temples that only added to his air of authority. He stepped forward with a practiced smile as they approached, his shoes clicking quietly on the marble floor.

"Agents Gift and Novak?"

"That's us," Rachel said, showing her badge and ID.

"I'm Dean Haverty, one of Mr.Porter's therapists."His handshake was firm but not aggressive, his manner professional yet warmly appropriate for someone in his position."Would you'll follow me?"

The hallway he led them down was wide and peaceful, with thick carpeting in muted earth tones that muffled their footsteps.Original artwork hung on walls painted in soothing sage green – landscapes mostly, Rachel noticed, all featuring calm waters and distant horizons.The air carried a faint scent of lavender, just enough to be calming without being cloying.Every few yards, small seating alcoves offered private spaces for quiet conversation.Rachel took note of the fact that Haverty didn't even attempt speaking to them as they walked.She wondered if it had something to do about regulations concerning discussions about patients in open areas.

Finally, they came to one of the alcoves, just outside of an office.Haverty gestured for them to sit, and they did.Haverty remained standing, giving them a warm smile.

"Mr.Porter has made good progress since his arrival," Haverty said, his voice pitched to match the hushed atmosphere of the hallway."But there's still quite a bit of work ahead.His addiction stems from deep-seated trauma, and we're only beginning to peel back those layers."He paused briefly, choosing his words."The loss of his medical license hit him particularly hard.In many ways, he's still mourning the death of his former identity."He frowned and said, "Sadly, that's all I can tell you without breaching confidentiality, as I'm sure you understand."

"Yes, of course," Novak said.

Rachel found herself studying their guide more carefully.There was something in his

manner that suggested he truly cared about his patients' recovery, rather than just seeing them as wealthy clients to be managed. It was in the slight furrow of his brow when he spoke about Porter's struggles, the way his steps slowed almost imperceptibly as they approached their destination.

"Has he left the facility at all since checking in?" Rachel asked bluntly, earning a slight frown from Novak at her directness.

Haverty shook his head without hesitation. "No. Unless there's some sort of family emergency, our residents are not allowed to leave until each therapist working with them has signed off. Mr. Porter hasn't reached that stage yet." He gestured to a security camera mounted discreetly in a corner. "We take the safety and security of our residents very seriously. He has been here for exactly two weeks as of today and has not stepped off the grounds a single time."

"Is he in there?" Rachel asked, nodding to the door on the other side of the alcove.

Haverty nodded, his expression serious. "He is. And you can speak to him but, as you were told on the phone, I need to be there when it happens. Also, I should warn you – Gregory is in a fairly depressed state right now. We're working through some difficult memories, and it's taken a toll. He can be prone to mood swings, so please approach any sensitive topics with care." He looked directly at Rachel as he added, "Sometimes the hardest part of recovery is facing the things we've lost."

Rachel nodded, exchanging a glance with Novak. She could read the silent message in her partner's eyes: handle this carefully. Dean nodded to the door, and Rachel and Novak got to their feet as Haverty opened the door.

The room beyond was clearly designed for comfort – plush armchairs upholstered in warm browns and deep greens, soft lighting from alabaster wall sconces, windows overlooking the grounds where rain still traced patterns down the glass. A gas

fireplace cast a gentle glow from one wall, its flames dancing behind crystal-clear glass. But its occupant looked anything but comfortable.

Gregory Porter sat rigid in a straight-backed chair, hands clasped so tightly in his lap that his knuckles showed white against skin that had clearly not seen sunlight in weeks. Dark circles shadowed his bloodshot eyes, making them appear sunken in his gaunt face. His rumpled clothing – expensive casual wear that somehow managed to look both too large and too constraining – hung loose on his frame, suggesting recent and rapid weight loss. His hair stuck up in uncombed tufts, as if he'd been running his fingers through it repeatedly, and a slight tremor in his hands spoke of either anxiety or withdrawal. Perhaps both.

Despite his disheveled appearance, Porter managed a wan smile as they entered. Rachel and Novak took seats on a leather couch across from him, while Dean settled into an armchair positioned slightly to the side, present but trying to be unobtrusive. Rachel noticed how Porter's eyes kept darting to his therapist, as if seeking reassurance.

"Thank you for seeing us, Dr. Porter," Novak began, his tone carefully neutral.

Porter's laugh was hollow, echoing oddly in the peaceful room. "Please. I haven't been 'Doctor' anything for months now. But I am curious why the FBI wants to talk to me." His fingers worked against each other restlessly, and Rachel noticed his nails were bitten to the quick.

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She studied him carefully as she spoke, watching for any hint of deception. "Your name came up during our investigation into Judge Marcus Smith's murder."

"Ah." Porter's smile turned bitter, and something dark flickered behind his eyes. "Because of how spectacularly his decision ruined my career? My life?" His voice rose slightly, and Dean shifted in his chair, leaning forward almost imperceptibly. Rachel noticed how Porter's hands had begun to shake more visibly.

"That was one factor we needed to look into, yes," Novak said carefully, his tone deliberately soothing. "Could you tell us about your history with Judge Smith?"

Porter's shoulders slumped, and Rachel watched as the anger seemed to drain out of him, leaving only exhaustion in its wake. "It was a malpractice case. A routine procedure gone wrong – the patient had an undiagnosed condition that caused complications. I'd had a drink the night before. Just one, to help me sleep, but..." He swallowed hard, Adam's apple bobbing in his thin neck. "Someone smelled it on my breath in the OR. Reported me. The patient's family sued. Judge Smith..." His hands clenched tighter, and Rachel could see his nails digging into his palms. "He didn't just rule against me. He made an example of me. Recommended the medical board revoke my license permanently."

"And that's what brought you here?" Rachel asked gently, noting how Dean nodded slightly in approval at her softer tone.

Porter nodded, running trembling fingers through his already-disheveled hair. "I started drinking more. A lot more. Couldn't sleep without it. Couldn't face myself in the mirror without it. My wife left, took the kids..." His voice cracked, and Rachel saw

him blink rapidly."This place was a last resort.Fifteen days sober now."He gave a shaky laugh that held no humor."Longest fifteen days of my life."

"Fifteen days?"Rachel leaned forward, trying not to show how this detail had just shattered their theory."You've been here continuously for the past fifteen days?"

"Yeah.Haven't set foot outside.Can't even look at the grounds without someone watching me.Right, Dean?"There was a hint of bitterness in his voice, but also something that might have been gratitude.

The therapist nodded, his expression compassionate but professional."Mr.Porter has been under continuous supervision since his arrival on the fourth."

Rachel felt the last of her hope deflate.Porter had been safely locked away when Smith was killed.Another dead end.Another day, the killer remained free.She glanced at Novak and saw her own frustration mirrored in his eyes.

"Thank you for your time," she said, standing."We appreciate your candor."

Porter's bitter smile returned, and Rachel caught a glimpse of the successful doctor he must have been before it all fell apart."Honesty's part of the program.Along with accepting that some things can't be fixed, no matter how much you might want to hurt the people who broke them."Something in his tone made Rachel study him more closely, but all she saw was bone-deep weariness.

Dean escorted them back through the peaceful hallways, past more landscapes with their serene horizons.Rachel barely noticed them now, her mind already racing ahead to the next steps in their investigation.They'd have to go back through everything, looking for something they must have missed.Time they couldn't afford to waste.

Outside, the rain had stopped, but the sky remained heavy and gray, pressing down

like a lid on the world. Rachel paused on the facility's front steps, looking out over the perfectly maintained grounds that suddenly felt more like prison walls than sanctuary. The Japanese maples seemed less beautiful now, their red leaves reminding her too much of other things.

"Well," Novak said beside her, his voice cutting through her dark thoughts, "that's one suspect we can cross off the list."

Rachel nodded, already dreading the mountain of case files waiting for them back at the office. Somewhere in Judge Smith's past was the key to his murder. They just had to hope they could find it before the killer struck again. Before another family got that knock on their door. Before another life was added to the toll of whatever twisted vendetta they were dealing with.

As they walked back to their vehicle, Rachel couldn't shake the feeling that they were missing something obvious. Something right in front of them. But all she could see was Porter's haunted eyes and trembling hands, the way he'd spoken about things that couldn't be fixed. She wondered how many other lives Judge Smith's decisions had shattered, and how many of those shattered people might be capable of murder.

## CHAPTER NINE

James Harrison's office occupied the corner suite on first floor of the Mitchell & Brooks building, its newly renovated spaces still smelling of fresh paint and recent construction. The large windows of the space, also new, allowed the setting sun to cast long fingers of amber light across his mahogany desk. Sadly, he barely noticed the sight. His mind was split into about five hundred different directions...which had been par for the course ever since the new construction had finished. It had cost precious man hours and had displaced him for a few days; he still felt like he was playing catch up.



A series of framed diplomas lined one wall—Yale undergraduate, Harvard Law—while the opposing wall displayed carefully chosen artwork: abstract pieces in muted colors that suggested sophistication without ostentation. His desk, massive and gleaming, had been positioned to face the door rather than the windows, a conscious choice that allowed him to maintain eye contact with anyone who entered. Also, he thought it was more professional to sit facing the door, ready to meet anyone who entered eye to eye—a psychological advantage he'd learned early in his career as a prosecutor.

The leather-bound law books lining the built-in shelves were not mere decoration; their well-worn spines and occasionally jutting bookmarks testified to regular use. A collection of small mementos on the credenza behind his desk told the story of a twenty-five-year career: photographs with three different governors, a plaque from the DA's office commemorating his hundredth successful prosecution, and—somewhat incongruously—a child's craft project, painstakingly spelling out "World's Best Dad" in macaroni and glitter.

Harrison leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking softly as he loosened his tie. The office felt eerily quiet without the usual bustle of his staff outside. He'd sent everyone home early after they'd received word about Judge Marcus Smith. The news had hit particularly hard; Smith had been a fixture in some of their professional lives for over fifteen years. Harrison could still picture him on the bench, those wire-rimmed glasses perched on the end of his nose, that particular way he had of tilting his head when he was skeptical of an argument.

Their paths had crossed countless times over the years. Harrison recalled the Rodriguez case from '18—a particularly nasty double homicide where Smith's careful jury instructions had been crucial to securing a conviction. Then there was the Thompson trial last spring, where Smith had masterfully managed a courtroom full of hostile witnesses and aggressive defense attorneys. They weren't friends, exactly, but there was a mutual respect built over hundreds of hours in that courtroom.

Seth Matthews, one of his senior paralegals, had actually clerked for Smith right out of law school. And Tammy, Harrison's assistant for the past eight years, had worked as Smith's stenographer early in her career. The judge had written her letter of recommendation when she'd applied for her current position.

Harrison reached for his phone, thinking to call Tammy about organizing some kind of memorial contribution. The staff would want to do something, and it would be better to coordinate their efforts. His fingers hovered over her contact information when a sound from the hallway made him pause.

A soft thud, like a door closing.

He frowned, glancing at his watch. 5:15. The cleaning crew wasn't due for another three hours, and he was certain everyone else had left. He'd watched them file out, offering subdued goodbyes, some with reddened eyes after hearing about Smith.

Harrison pushed back from his desk and walked to his office door. The overhead lights in the outer office were dimmed to their evening setting, casting strange shadows across the empty cubicles. "Tammy?" he called out, though he knew she'd left hours ago to pick up her son from soccer practice.

His footsteps seemed unnaturally loud on the polished floor as he made his way past the reception area. Everything looked normal: files neatly stacked, computers sleeping, coffee cups washed and put away. A half-empty water bottle sat on Carol's desk, condensation still beading on its surface.

The break room door was ajar, spilling a wedge of fluorescent light into the hallway. Harrison pushed it open wider, taking in the immaculate counters and the fresh coffee filter Tammy always set up for the next morning. The room smelled faintly of lemon cleaner and coffee grounds.

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Nothing out of place. Nothing to explain the sound that had drawn him out here.

Harrison shook his head, feeling slightly foolish. The new construction meant that there were, on occasion, settling noises. Surely, that's all it had been. He was letting Smith's death make him jumpy. He turned to head back to his office, already thinking about what he'd say when he called Tammy, trying to come up with an amount that would be generous but not too showy.

As he turned back around, someone was behind him. The man seemed to materialize from the shadows.

Harrison registered several details in rapid succession: medium height, unremarkable features, clothes that could have been worn by any office worker in the building. But it was the eyes that stopped him cold—flat and empty as shark eyes, watching him with clinical detachment.

Before Harrison could speak, before he could even draw breath to shout, the man's fist drove into his solar plexus with devastating precision. All the air left Harrison's lungs in a whoosh as he doubled over. His knees buckled and he went down hard, catching a glimpse of the man's shoes—ordinary brown oxfords, the kind you'd see in any department store—before a vicious kick to his ribs sent him sprawling.

Pain exploded through his side as he hit the floor. His temple hit it hard, and a blast of pain roared through his head. Through the roaring in his ears, he heard the soft scuff of those ordinary shoes moving closer. Harrison tried to push himself up, to crawl away, but another kick caught him in the same spot. Something cracked. The pain was astronomical now, radiating through his chest with every desperate attempt to

breathe. Blood from his head dripped to the floor; it looked much brighter than he might have imagined.

Lying there on the polished floor he'd walked across thousands of times, James Harrison had a moment of perfect clarity: he was going to die here, killed by this stranger. The thought struck him with the same cold certainty he'd felt when delivering closing arguments in his most airtight cases. The evidence was overwhelming. The verdict is inevitable.

The shoes stopped beside his head. Harrison forced his eyes open, looking up past the shoes, the ordinary slacks, the ordinary jacket, to that unremarkable face with its dead eyes. The man was holding something—a syringe, its contents catching the dim light like liquid amber.

"Who—" Harrison managed to gasp, but the man was already kneeling beside him, and the needle was descending toward his neck with the same methodical precision as everything else.

The last thing James Harrison saw was his own reflection in those empty eyes, and he understood with sudden, horrifying clarity exactly why no one had noticed this man, why no one had stopped him, why he had been able to walk right into this building and up to this floor.

He looked like he belonged here. He looked like he belonged anywhere.

He looked like no one at all.

The needle slid home, and darkness followed.

## CHAPTER TEN

The steady drip of the ancient coffee maker in the corner marked time like a metronome as Rachel scrolled and sifted through what seemed like an endless sea of files—some from the courts and some from the bureau's criminal database. The small conference room felt more claustrophobic with each passing hour, its walls now entirely hidden behind hastily pinned crime scene photos and timeline charts.

Reading through it all was like scanning some sort of sordid history book, viewing all the many ways human beings were, at their core, nothing more than a bunch of screw-ups.

"Here's another one," Novak said, his eyes tired from nearly two hours of reading through the files. "Triple homicide, 2018. Judge Smith gave Gerald Mackenzie three consecutive life sentences." He cleared his throat, shuffling through papers. "Mackenzie's brother made some pretty explicit threats during sentencing. Even punched a cop when he tried to stage a protest in front of the courthouse."

Rachel looked up from the autopsy photos spread before her. "Where's the brother now?"

"Dead." Novak made a note on the whiteboard, then crossed it out immediately. "OD'd in 2020."

Another dead end (pun only slightly intended). They'd been at this for nearly two hours now, combing through Judge Smith's most controversial cases. The table between them had become a landscape of human tragedy – murderers, rapists, armed robbers, all carrying their own grudges against the man who'd sentenced them. She knew this was all part of the job and that it had only been two hours; hell, she'd spent days doing this exact same thing in the past. But she'd been a much younger agent then. More patient, more eager to please no matter what she was doing.

"What about this one?" Rachel pulled a file from one of the towering stacks. "Martin Webb, convicted of second-degree murder in 2015. Smith denied all his appeals despite significant character testimony." She skimmed the yellowed pages. "Webb's daughter wrote letters to the judge every Christmas begging him to reconsider."

"Webb...Webb," Novak replied, consulting his laptop. After a few seconds of clicking and scrolling, he added: "Webb's still in Rockview. No contact with the outside world except his lawyer for the past three years."

Rachel turned back to Smith's autopsy photos, drawn again to the hasty injection site on Smith's arm. The skin around it was bruised, showing signs of multiple failed attempts. Her eyes drifted to his wrist, studying the deep indentation that wrapped around it like a bracelet. It was little to go on, but she did believe it spoke volumes about their killer. Someone didn't just have this sort of stuff lying around. This had been strategically planned.

She thought back to what they knew about Smith and what had been done to him. The cocktail of drugs in his system – they weren't just meant to kill him. It had been designed to keep him unconscious, compliant. She paused, a thought taking shape. This wasn't just about revenge. It was about making him experience something specific.

Her phone buzzed, buried somewhere under a stack of witness statements. Rachel ignored it, pulling another file closer. "Here – William Samson, 2019. Armed robbery gone wrong, victim ended up in a permanent vegetative state. Smith denied the family's request to have charges reduced in exchange for restitution to help with medical bills."

The phone buzzed again. This time, Rachel dug it out from under a file, finding two texts from Jack: About to eat dinner. When can we expect you home? followed by Lasagna, remember? Still warm if you hurry.

The messages tugged at something in her chest. She glanced at her watch – 6:57 PM. How many times during her first years with the Bureau had she missed dinner? How many nights had she called Peter to say she'd be "just another hour" only to stumble home long after he and Paige had gone to bed? How many nights had Peter put Paige down by himself and then seemed cold and distant when she finally got home?

Was she really going to do that same thing to Jack now? Was she once again going to make Paige feel like she was not a priority?

She'd promised herself things would be different after the cancer. After coming so close to losing everything, she'd sworn she wouldn't take these ordinary moments for granted again.

"Here's a weird one," Novak said, interrupting her thoughts. "A civil case from 2017. A family wanted to remove life support from a car accident victim, but the victim's son fought it. Smith ruled in the son's favor, kept the mother on life support against the rest of the family's wishes." He frowned at the file. "Mother lived another three years in a vegetative state before finally passing."

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Rachel's attention snapped back. "What was the family dynamic?"

"Two sons, split on the decision. Younger brother wanted to honor what he claimed were his mother's wishes to not be kept alive by machines. Older brother insisted there was still hope for recovery." Novak flipped through pages. "Got pretty ugly in court apparently. Older brother moved away right after the ruling, cut ties with the family."

Something about that pinged Rachel's investigative instincts, but before she could follow the thread, her phone buzzed again: Paige asking about you. Says she has news from school she wants to share.

Rachel stared at the message, guilt and frustration warring in her chest. The work would always be urgent. There would always be one more file to check, one more lead to follow. But Paige's news – that was happening now, tonight, and Rachel was missing it. And let's face it, she thought. How often does Paige want to share anything these days?

She looked around the cramped conference room at the endless parade of tragedy documented in countless files. The faces of victims and perpetrators stared back from crime scene photos and mug shots, each one demanding justice, attention, resolution.

"You know what?" Rachel began gathering files into her briefcase. "I think I'm going to take some of these home to review. Not necessarily call it a day, but...you know. Just to get out of here."

The relief that flashed across Novak's face was almost comical. He dropped his marker onto the whiteboard ledge with perhaps a bit too much enthusiasm. "Oh, thank



God," he said, then immediately looked embarrassed. "I mean – I was trying to hang in there, you know? Didn't want to seem like a baby."

Rachel laughed, surprising herself with the sound. "And I was trying to set a good example for my new partner." She sorted through files, selecting key cases. "Look at us, stuck in here trying to impress each other while our dinners get cold."

As they cleaned up, Rachel's mind kept circling back to the marks on Smith's wrist, to the amateur quality of that final injection. The longer she looked at this case, the more convinced she became that they were missing something obvious. This wasn't about revenge for a harsh sentence. This was personal in a different way – it spoke of someone who understood what it meant to feel trapped, helpless, at the mercy of others' decisions.

Novak helped her load several files into her briefcase, then started erasing the whiteboard. "You know," he said, hesitating slightly, "I was worried when they assigned me as your partner. Your reputation...well, let's just say it's a lot to live up to."

Rachel paused in gathering her things, studying her new partner. In the months they'd worked together, she'd been so focused on missing Jack, on comparing Novak to the partnership she'd lost, that she'd almost missed seeing how hard he was trying to prove himself.

"I was worried, too," she admitted. "About living up to my own reputation. About trying to be the same agent I was before..." She gestured vaguely, encompassing everything – the cancer, the losses, the hard-won second chances.

"Maybe we don't have to be," Novak said quietly. "Maybe we just have to be good enough."

Rachel nodded, a small smile tugging at her lips. "Get some rest, Novak. Tomorrow we look at this with fresh eyes." She hefted her briefcase, heavy with selected files.

She then quickly grabbed her phone and sent a message back to Jack. Leaving now. Headed home.

As she walked through the quiet building toward the elevator, Rachel's mind trailed back to that civil case Novak had mentioned – maybe there was something there, something about family members divided over a loved one's fate. She stepped into the elevator, her mind still turning over details of the case. Someone had held Judge Smith captive, kept him helpless and dependent on others for basic needs. Someone who knew exactly what that felt like, perhaps someone who had watched a loved one in that state for years.

Tomorrow they'd start fresh. Tomorrow, they'd find the connection they were missing.

But tonight – tonight she was going home to her family, to the life she'd fought so hard to keep. The case files could wait until after dinner. After all, wasn't that what second chances were for?

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Night had fallen as Rachel pulled into the driveway at 7:22. The porch light was on and as she stepped out of her car, she did her best to recall where, exactly, the day had gone. It had been a long one for sure, but the sort that speeds by in the blink of an eye. She carried her briefcase of Judge Smith case files with her, and as she opened the front door, the rich aroma of garlic and herbs drifting through the evening air made her stomach growl. The stress and irritation of the day seemed to melt away at the smells.

The warmth hit her first when she stepped inside – not just the physical warmth of a

well-used kitchen, but the kind that came from a home filled with life. The sound of Paige's laughter carried from the kitchen, followed by Jack's deeper chuckle. For a moment, Rachel stayed in the entryway, letting the familiar sounds wash over her. These were the moments that still caught her off guard sometimes, the simple miracle of having this second chance at happiness. It was made so much sweeter by the laughter between Jack and Paige. Their bond was growing stronger and though Jack knew full well he'd never be Paige's father (and vice versa) he never stopped acting like the strong, male role model she needed in her life.

"There she is," Jack called out as she rounded the corner and stepped into the kitchen. She set her briefcase and computer bag down by the bar and eyed the table, now realizing that she was much hungrier than she had assumed. He was already rising from his chair, moving toward the cabinet with the practiced ease of someone who had anticipated her arrival. "Just in time to try my latest Pinterest adventure."

Rachel hung her jacket on the back of her chair, breathing in the mouth-watering scent of his lasagna. "You're becoming obsessed with that site."

"Hey, when you find what works..." He slid a generous portion onto her plate, the layers of pasta, meat, and cheese still steaming. "Though I did have to scroll past fifteen different 'life-changing organization hacks' and a tutorial on making my own soap to get to it. Did you know you can apparently transform your entire life by buying matching containers for your pantry?"

"Don't give him ideas," Paige groaned, but her eyes sparkled with amusement. "He already spent half an hour yesterday organizing the spice rack alphabetically."

"Which you'll thank me for next time you're looking for the oregano," Jack pointed out, returning to his seat.

Rachel sat down with the rest of her family. The first bite of lasagna melted in

Rachel's mouth, the perfect balance of flavors making her close her eyes in appreciation. "Worth every minute of scrolling," she murmured.

She expected Paige to disappear upstairs as she usually did after dinner, retreating into the world of homework and social media that seemed to occupy most teenagers' evenings. But tonight, her daughter lingered at the table, picking at the remains of her garlic bread with unusual focus. Rachel recognized the signs – the slight bounce of her knee under the table, the way she kept tucking and re-tucking her hair behind her ear. It was the same restless energy she'd had as a little girl when she was bursting to share exciting news. That's right, Rachel thought, recalling one of Jack's texts. She has some sort of news from school.

"So," Rachel said carefully, studying her daughter's face. "How was school?"

Paige's eyes lit up immediately, confirming Rachel's suspicion. "Actually...something kind of amazing happened today." She sat up straighter, her fingers playing with the hem of her sleeve – a gesture so like Peter's that it made Rachel's heart catch. Even after all these years, these little echoes of him could still take her by surprise. "You know that paper I wrote on the Louisiana Purchase?"

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"The one you stayed up until midnight working on last week because you put it off until the last minute?"

"Yeah, that one," she said quickly. "Anyway, Mrs. Henderson – she's been really encouraging about my writing all year, you know?– anyway, she submitted it to this statewide history competition, and..." Paige's smile widened until it seemed to illuminate her whole face. "It got selected as one of the finalists!"

"That's fantastic!" Rachel reached across the table to squeeze her daughter's hand, her own fatigue forgotten in the face of Paige's excitement. "When do you find out about the winners?"

"Two weeks. But even if I don't win, just being a finalist means my paper might be published in their annual journal." Paige's cheeks flushed with pride, and for a moment, Rachel saw the echo of the little girl who used to run home from school clutching art projects and spelling tests, desperate to share her achievements. "I...uh..."

"What is it?" Rachel asked.

With a slight frown, she looked almost guiltily to her and Jack and said, "It made me think of dad. You know...big history nerd and all. He would have loved it, right?"

The mention of Peter didn't sting as much as it once had. Time had smoothed those jagged edges, transformed the sharp pain of loss into something more bittersweet. And Jack handled it wonderfully, as he always did. He understood that Peter needed to be remembered and discussed. He usually remained quiet unless he was asked something

specifically.

"He absolutely would have. He'd probably be printing copies for everyone at his office right now, boring them all with detailed explanations of Thomas Jefferson's negotiation tactics."

"And insisting on a frame for the first page," Jack added softly, his hand finding Rachel's under the table. These moments could still be delicate, this careful dance of honoring Peter's memory while embracing their new family configuration.

Jack cleared his throat. "Well, I say this calls for ice cream. We still have some of that mint chocolate chip, right? The good kind, with the actual chocolate pieces?"

But Paige was already pushing back from the table, gathering her plate. "Rain check? I want to grab a shower before tackling my English homework. Mr. Peterson's tests are brutal if you're not completely prepared."

"Of course. Any time is a good time for ice cream."

"Preach, brother," Paige said, offering him a high five. He took it, their hands slapping together as they laughed about whatever inside joke they had between them. Rachel wondered if Paige was simply disappearing upstairs because she feared she'd made things awkward by mentioning her father.

After Paige disappeared upstairs, Rachel and Jack fell into their familiar cleanup routine. She washed while he dried, their movements synchronized by years of partnership. The comfortable silence was broken only by the soft clink of dishes and the distant sound of the shower starting upstairs.

"I need to review some files tonight," she said, passing him a sudsy plate. "The Judge Smith case."

Jack's expression darkened slightly. "Yeah, I caught wind of that at a meeting this morning. How's that going?"

"Slowly. Too slowly." She described the details they'd uncovered, the frustrating lack of physical evidence, the literal ocean of files to go through, growing sense that they were missing something crucial. "It's like trying to put together a puzzle where half the pieces are invisible. We know they're there, we just can't see them yet. And I'm afraid there are more boxes with even more pieces that we haven't even found yet."

"God, I don't miss that part." Jack stacked the last plate in the cabinet with perhaps more force than necessary. "Though some days I'd take it over another budget meeting. You know what Thompson called me yesterday? A 'process optimization specialist.'" He affected a pompous tone that made Rachel laugh despite the weight of her earlier thoughts.

"Poor corporate stooge," she teased, flicking water at him. "How the mighty have fallen."

"Hey, I'll have you know I'm very important. I have color-coded spreadsheets and everything."

Once the dishes were done, they settled at opposite ends of the dinner table with their respective work. It was becoming almost a common occurrence. Rachel spread out photos of Judge Smith's arm and files on Judge Smith cases while Jack opened his laptop to go over some last-minute details on future staffing needs at the bureau. The quiet was comfortable, broken only by the soft tapping of his keyboard and the rustle of paper as she turned pages. Every now and then, she'd catch him watching her with a slight smile, and she'd feel that familiar warmth in her chest – the one that still surprised her sometimes, this second chance at happiness she'd never expected to find.

The information on all of Judge Smith's rulings did indeed feel like a puzzle as she worked, each detail a potential key to unlocking the larger mystery. Her notes filled page after page, but something still felt off, just beyond her grasp. Like a word on the tip of her tongue, refusing to fully form.

By 10:30, her eyes were burning from strain, the words beginning to blur together. She gathered her files, trying to ignore the way Judge Smith's face seemed to watch her from the photos. The victims always watched, in her experience. Even from paper, they demanded answers, justice, resolution. She also thought of his poor wife, so destroyed by the loss of her husband that she'd been unable to speak with anyone at the hospital out of fear of a cardiac event of some kind.

Upstairs, she found Paige in the bathroom, brushing her teeth. Her daughter's hair was still damp from her shower, and she was wearing her oldest, most comfortable pajamas – the ones with the faded stars that she refused to throw away.

"Night, sweetheart." Rachel kissed her daughter's temple, breathing in the familiar scent of her shampoo. "I'm really proud of you, you know that?"

"Thanks." And for a moment, Rachel caught a glimpse of the same smile Paige had once flashed as a younger child, always seeking attention and approval.

In her bedroom, as she changed into her pajamas, thoughts of Scarlett crept in unbidden. Private thoughts like those tended to come around much easier—almost like comforting ghosts. But this time, they brought Cody Austin's face with them – that bland, forgettable face that had haunted her for years. The kind of face that could disappear into any crowd, that no witness would remember clearly enough to describe. She almost went back downstairs to tell Jack about her suspicions, but stopped herself. It would sound paranoid, wouldn't it? Seeing connections where there might not be any, letting old ghosts color her judgment. Besides, she had no proof. Just that nagging feeling in her gut, the one that had kept her alive all these years.



Jack came to bed just as she was turning out the light. He slid close behind her, his hand finding her hip. "Any chance..."

"Mm, sleep mode already activated," she murmured, but smiled into the darkness. The warmth of his body against hers was comforting, familiar. "Ask me again in the morning."

"I'll hold you to that."

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“Please do. I’m sorry, I just...it’s been a day...”

“I get it,” he said. He kissed her shoulder and settled back, his breathing quickly evening out into the rhythm of sleep.

Rachel found her own sleep surprisingly fast. And at some point in the murky depths, she found herself dreaming. In it, she was in a brightly lit, white room that was filled with a sterile hospital smell, the steady beep of monitors. The fluorescent lights overhead cast everything in a sickly green glow. But this time, when she opened her eyes, it wasn't doctors surrounding her bed. Alex Lynch stood at her head, his prison jumpsuit splattered with blood. Alice Denbrough to her right, smiling a terrible empty smile. And there, at the foot of the bed, she saw Cody Austin. He was holding a scalpel with surgical precision. His unremarkable face was transformed by a cold intelligence that she remembered all too well.

"Time for your treatment, Agent Gift," Lynch whispered, and all three raised their blades—

Her phone's shrill ring yanked her awake, heart pounding against her ribs. 1:05 glowed on the bedside clock, the red numbers seeming to float in the darkness. She fumbled for the phone and brought it to her ear. Her voice was surprisingly clear when she said, “Hello?”

Director Anderson's voice was tight with urgency when she answered. "We've got another one, Agent Gift. James Harrison, attorney, missing from his office. Signs of struggle. Given the timing after Judge Smith, it's assumed they may be related somehow."

"I'll call Novak and head over." She was already sitting up on the side of the bed, her toes finding the floor. But the nightmare clung to her like cobwebs, making her skin crawl. "Can you text me the address?"

"As soon as we end this call. Thank, Gift."

Jack stirred beside her. "Everything okay?" His voice was sleepy and groggy.

"Yeah," she said. Adrenaline already pushing away the nightmare's shadows, replacing them with the familiar urgency of a break in the case. Of course, it was never a good thing when such a break came in the form of another potential dead body. "Duty calls."

She could feel the weight of her dream-ghosts watching as she dressed, their phantom scalpels gleaming in the darkness. But she had real monsters to chase now. She couldn't afford to be haunted by the old ones.

She leaned over and kissed Jack on the forehead before collecting her clothes in the darkness, ready to head back out to face those real monsters.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The dark morning hours seemed to gently usher them inside as Rachel and Novak stepped into the lobby of James Harrison's law office. The space held that particular stillness unique to buildings after hours—a hollow quiet that made every footstep feel heavier than it actually was. Two uniformed officers stood near the entrance, speaking in hushed tones with a man in gray coveralls who kept wringing his hands—a janitor or a member of a cleaning crew from the looks of it. The lobby's wood-paneled walls absorbed what little warmth the overhead lighting provided, making the space feel more like a mausoleum than a place of business.

Rachel's gaze immediately went to the janitor. Years of experience had taught her to watch everyone, to suspect everyone. But the man's face was ashen, his eyes wide with the unmistakable shock of someone who'd stumbled onto something they'd never expected to see. His hands trembled as he gestured, describing what he'd found to the officers. A ring of keys jangled at his hip with each movement, the sound unnaturally loud in the quiet space.

She noticed how his eyes kept darting to the hallway that led deeper into the building, as if expecting something—or someone—to emerge from the shadows. The cleaning cart stood abandoned near the wall, various bottles and supplies scattered across its surface, telling the story of a routine night suddenly interrupted.

"Excuse me?" Rachel approached, keeping her voice gentle. The janitor started at her voice, and the two cops nodded to her, as if giving her the floor. "I'm Special Agent Gift with the FBI. Could you tell me exactly how you found the scene?"

The janitor swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. "I—I always start on the third floor, work my way down. Makes more sense, you know? But today I had to change my routine because they waxed up there today. Finishing off the floors after the new construction." His voice quavered, accent thickening with stress. "So I started down here and saw the break room light was still on. Thought someone forgot to turn it off, but then I saw—" He gestured helplessly toward the hallway, his hand shaking so badly he had to lower it.

Rachel noticed a small cut on his right palm, fresh enough that it hadn't fully scabbed over. "Your hand—did that happen tonight?"

"What? Oh, no," he said, shaking his head emphatically. "Yesterday, fixing my car. I have receipts from the auto parts store if you need—"

"That won't be necessary," Rachel assured him, making a mental note to verify it

anyway. Two decades of law enforcement had taught her that coincidences rarely existed in cases like these.

One of the officers, a heavyset black man with graying temples and laugh lines around his eyes that suggested a usually cheerful disposition, stepped forward. His badge caught the fluorescent light as he moved. "Officer Jennings," he introduced himself. Despite his friendly face, his eyes were sharp and alert. "If you'll follow me, I can show you what Mr. Rodriguez found." He glanced at Rachel. "Dispatch mentioned something about connecting this to a judge's death?"

Rachel exchanged a look with Novak. Her new partner's expression was carefully neutral, but she caught the slight tension in his jaw. "We'll need to confirm the connection, but yes, potentially. That's why we're here."

Jennings led them down a corridor where the overhead lights cast alternating pools of brightness and shadow. The carpet was industrial gray, newly installed as part of the recent renovations based on the look and smell of it. Old law books lined built-in shelves along one wall, their spines faded with age. Rachel noticed how the books were organized by topic and year; someone in this office was meticulous about organization.

The air grew noticeably cooler as they walked deeper into the building. Rachel's nose caught the artificial lemon scent of cleaning products, probably from Rodriguez's cart, mixed with the musty smell of old paper and the lingering aroma of coffee.

"Break room's right through here," Jennings said, pushing open a door with a gloved hand. The hinges creaked slightly—another detail that struck Rachel as important, though she couldn't yet say why. Would their perpetrator have heard that same creak?

Rachel's trained eye immediately cataloged the scene. The break room was small, maybe twelve by fifteen feet, with cheap white tiles that had yellowed over time. A

round table lay on its side, one leg slightly bent from impact. Three chairs were scattered—two knocked over, one pushed back against the wall as if someone had risen quickly.

"Blood," Novak noted, pointing to three distinct streaks on the floor near the overturned table. They weren't large, but they told a story of violence. Rachel noticed how they formed an arc, suggesting someone had turned sharply, perhaps trying to escape. Or had been dragged out, already bleeding. She supposed this was what had the janitor in such a state.

The wall near the overturned table showed a fresh scuff mark about waist height. A struggle, then—someone pushed against the wall? She made a mental note to have forensics check for fiber transfers.

Rachel moved carefully around the perimeter of the room, taking in details. A coffee maker sat on the counter, half a pot of now-cold coffee still in the carafe. A ceramic mug lay shattered near the base of the cabinets, dark liquid having left a stain on the grout between tiles. The pattern of the coffee splatter suggested it had fallen from counter height.

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"Temperature of the coffee might help establish timeline," she murmured, making a mental note to have forensics check it. She noticed a small notepad next to the coffee maker, its top page torn off hastily, leaving ragged edges. In the corner of the remaining page, she could make out the impression of numbers—possibly a phone number.

The break room's small window looked out onto the parking lot, now lit by security lights in the growing dusk. A corkboard hung nearby, covered in the usual office detritus—takeout menus, safety notices, a cartoon about coffee.

"Signs of a struggle, but controlled," Rachel observed, turning back to Jennings and Novak. "No wild destruction. The overturned table, the blood pattern—it suggests a brief fight, probably ended quickly. Our perpetrator likely used some kind of incapacitating agent."

"Maybe something like they found in Smith," Novak suggested.

Jennings nodded from behind them, his expression grim. "We've called forensics, they're en route. You want to see the rest?"

"Yes, but first—I noticed there was a single car in the lot, aside from the police cruisers," Rachel said.

"Yeah, I saw that, too," Novak said. "I'll check the plates, see if it belongs to Harrison." Novak headed out, his footsteps fading down the corridor.

The sound of the building's heating system kicked on, startling Rachel slightly. She

noticed Jennings tense as well—everyone was on edge, aware that they might be standing in the middle of an active crime scene.

Rachel followed Jennings to Harrison's office, noting how the carpet showed signs of recent vacuuming—parallel lines still visible in the pile. Among the lemon scent of the cleaning supplies, she could also smell the evidence of the recent renovation and construction that had been mentioned.

The office was larger than the break room, with a window that looked out onto a small, unremarkable strip of lawn. A desk of dark wood dominated the room, its surface organized with methodical precision. A laptop sat closed to one side, a legal pad beside it. Family photos lined one shelf—Harrison with what appeared to be his wife and two teenage children, all smiling on what looked like a beach vacation. The photos were arranged chronologically, Rachel noticed, showing the children growing up over the years. Among those pictures, there were several awards and diplomas. She took note of a single card, clearly drawn by a child, and it made the scene seem so much sadder.

The chair behind the desk was pushed back at an angle, as if its occupant had left in a hurry. A coffee cup sat on the desk, with just a small bit left behind.

"Has anyone touched anything in here?" Rachel asked Jennings.

"No, ma'am. Secured the scene as soon as we arrived." He stood in the doorway, his bulk filling the frame. "Rodriguez said he only looked in, didn't enter."

Rachel pulled on gloves and began a careful examination of the desk. The legal pad showed impression marks from previous writing. She angled it, letting the overhead light catch the indentations. Nothing immediately useful, but forensics might be able to recover the text. A stack of manila folders sat in a wire basket marked "URGENT." She carefully lifted the top one, noting the label: "Mitchell Estate." She



made a mental note of this but did not see it as being immediately important.

The desk calendar showed several appointments crossed out, suggesting Harrison had been in the office most of the day. His cell phone sat beside his laptop. When she pressed the button on the side to wake it up, she saw another picture of James Harrison's children.

In the corner of a separate sheet of paper, she found a handwritten note: "Tammy, re: \$ or gift for Smith's family?" She photographed it carefully with her phone. Proof that Harrison had known about Smith's death—and perhaps had reason to be concerned he might be another target for their killer.

The sound of footsteps announced Novak's return. "Ran the plates," he said from the doorway. "The car out in the lot is indeed registered to James Harrison. He definitely left his vehicle here."

Rachel straightened, her mind already racing ahead to implications. "So we potentially have two victims now. We need to—"

"Agents?" Jennings interrupted from the doorway. "Forensics team just arrived."

"Thanks," Novak said, looking around the office. "Anything of note in here, Gift?"

"Just this," she said, pointing to the note about the financial gift for Smith's family. "It's a connection between him and Smith."

She moved to the window, looking out at the darkening city beyond the strip of lawn and feeder road that connected the parking lot to the highway. Somewhere out there, James Harrison might still be alive. And if their suspect was following the same pattern as with Smith, they had precious little time to find him. They could be injecting him right now with the same inexperience that could have very well killed

Smith.

The city lights blurred slightly, and Rachel realized she'd been staring too long, her mind racing through possibilities. She could feel the familiar pressure building behind her eyes—the start of a headache she couldn't afford right now. She's gotten them quite regularly as of late, but her doctors and specialists had assured her this would happen, that it was normal after the sort of ordeal her body had been through. The headaches were of no real concern unless they lasted beyond a day and did not respond to over-the-counter medicines. And so far, she'd experienced nothing like that.

"Novak," she said, turning back to her partner. "We need to find everything we can about Harrison's connection to Judge Smith. If we can do it quickly, we may be able to save Harrison's life."

"Back to the files, then?"

"Yes, but if we can manage to get an assist from someone who knew Harrison or Smith, I think we could narrow it down a bit now that we have two men who were clearly connected."

As they prepared to leave the office to forensics, Rachel took one last look around. The perfectly organized desk. The family photos. And then the blood streaks back at the breakroom. It was all starting to form a dark and violent picture.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

James Harrison's head felt like it was stuffed with cotton, his thoughts sliding past each other without connecting. It all felt soft, as if his body was some other piece of a weird tapestry and his head had come unraveled from it. The first coherent sensation that broke through the fog was pressure—firm and unyielding—across his chest. His

arms wouldn't move. Something was wrong.

He opened his eyes and found his vision blurry. But with a few blinks, everything seemed to clear up.

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The ceiling above him swam into focus, featureless white that had aged to a sickly yellow-brown in the corners. A musty smell hit his nostrils, the kind of slight decay that seeps into walls over decades. And behind it, something that was almost chemical in nature. As his vision sharpened, panic started to rise in his throat.

Move. You need to move.

He tried to lift his arms again, but it was impossible. He managed to tilt his head upward just enough to see the thick leather straps that were holding his arms down firmly at his sides. The material creaked as he strained against it, the sound unnaturally loud in the quiet room. More straps crossed his chest, his legs, his ankles—each attempt at movement revealing another point of restraint. His button-down shirt and tie were gone, leaving him in just his undershirt and slacks. The fabric felt damp with sweat against his skin.

Harrison continued to crane his neck, fighting against the wave of dizziness the movement triggered. The straps were anchored to what appeared to be a hospital gurney, its metal frame spotted with rust. His stomach lurched as memories started to surface—leaving his office late, the break room, a presence behind him, then nothing.

Movement caught his eye in the dimly lit room. A man stood at the foot of the gurney, watching him. Something about his face tugged at Harrison's memory, like a word caught on the tip of his tongue. The man's features were unremarkable, the kind you'd pass on the street without a second glance, but there was something...

Where do I know you from?

He was quite certain this was the man who had attacked him at work. Those plain brown shoes stood out in his mind, kicking and attacking. His head seemed to cry out with the memory of striking the floor and pouring forth blood.

The room around them was small, claustrophobic. Wood paneling covered every wall, dark with age and warped in places where moisture had seeped through. An ancient dresser squatted against one wall, its surface dusty except for a small lamp that cast sickly yellow light across the space. On top of the dresser sat an old television, its screen a dead black eye watching the scene unfold. No pictures hung on the walls, no personal touches—just empty space and shadows.

Harrison's legal training kicked in, his mind automatically cataloging details even as fear clawed at his chest. Note everything. Remember everything. There might be a chance—

His thoughts stuttered to a halt as he noticed the second gurney. It sat to his left like some sad, forgotten stage prop.

A woman lay there, motionless. Her skin had a grayish cast in the dim light, her chest barely moving. For a horrible moment, Harrison thought she was dead, but then he caught the slight rise and fall of her breathing. An IV line snaked from her arm to a bag hanging above her. The stand on which it hung didn't seem to be the best quality. He wasn't even sure it was an actual IV stand at all.

The man moved, and Harrison's attention snapped back to him. He was holding something—a needle connected to another IV bag. Harrison's pulse spiked as he remembered being injected back at work, just outside of the break room.

"What are you putting into me?" The words came out weaker than he intended, fear stripping away the authority he'd cultivated over decades in the courtroom. "Who are you? What the hell are you doing?"

The man didn't respond. His movements were hurried and urgent as he inserted the needle into Harrison's arm. He felt an immense pressure and then a small sting, followed by the cold sensation of liquid entering his vein. Harrison pulled against the restraints again, the leather pressing harder into his wrists.

"You can't—" Harrison started, but his tongue felt heavy. "Please..."

The man turned away, heading for the door. In the lamplight, his ordinary features shifted, and suddenly Harrison knew where he'd seen him before. Years ago, in a courtroom...

But that seemed like something from another world, a world where everything made sense and he had not been captured, hooked into a second rate IV...

Oh God, please help...

The man paused at the doorway, turning back. His unremarkable face held no emotion as he spoke, his voice soft and precise. "Judge Smith died here, you know. Right where you are now." A slight smile touched his lips. "I didn't mean for it to happen. I just... he was weaker than I expected."

The man said nothing else as he turned around and exited the room. He closed the door behind him with a quiet click.

Harrison stared at the wood paneling, his thoughts growing sluggish. What court case did he know this man from? If he could recall it, maybe he could speak with the man... reason with him.

But whatever he'd been injected with through that IV was taking hold now, pulling him down into darkness. Harrison tried to fight it, but his eyelids grew heavier with each blink. The woman on the other gurney hadn't moved. Soon, he'd look just like

her.

I'm going to die here.

The thought should have terrified him, but the sedative was dampening everything, wrapping his fear in gentle waves of soothing colors. The lamp's light seemed to pulse, shadows crawling across the wood paneling like living things. Harrison thought of his office, his perfectly organized desk, the halls he walked down every day. Would anyone notice he was missing? How long before they started looking?

His gaze drifted to the television again. It sat there like a relic from another time, covered in dust, its screen reflecting nothing. He doubted it had been powered on for more than a decade. He wondered if it had been in this room for that long. Was he in some strange, forgotten room that had been untouched for years?

The ceiling started to blur. Harrison could feel his heart beating, too slow now, each pulse pushing more of the drug through his system. The straps seemed to tighten with every breath, or maybe that was just his imagination. He couldn't tell anymore.

Fight it. Stay awake. You have to...

But he couldn't remember what he had to do. The room was fading, reality dissolving around the edges. Somewhere in the distance, he thought he heard footsteps, but that might have been his heartbeat, growing fainter and fainter.

The last thing Harrison saw before consciousness slipped away was the woman on the other gurney. In the dying light, she looked like a corpse, a preview of what he would become. Then the darkness took him, and James Harrison ceased to think at all.

The lamp continued to burn, casting its sickly light over the scene—two bodies, barely breathing, trapped in a room that had already claimed one life.

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The dawn light crept through the blinds of the small conference room like hesitant fingers, casting thin strips of pale gold across everything—the scatter of papers and coffee cups that had accumulated over the last few hours, the laptops, the table itself. Rachel rubbed her eyes, the grit beneath her lids a reminder of the mere two hours of sleep she'd gotten before the call about Harrison came in. They were currently in a conference room just down the hallway from the breakroom, where it was assumed James Harrison had been beaten and abducted. Neither Rachel nor Novak had seen the point in returning to the field office if they could literally sit in the center of all of Harrison's work-related information.

As Rachel read through a print-out of a case from four years ago, a cardboard box landed on the table with a dull thud. The sound seemed to echo her mounting frustration. The smell of stale coffee hung in the air, mingling with the lingering scent of whatever cleaning product the janitorial staff had used the night before—though he had been sent home shortly after Rachel and Nova had arrived, unable to finish his work. Rachel's stomach churned, protesting the combination of too much caffeine and too little food. And too little sleep.

"That's the last of them," Novak said, his voice rough with fatigue as he stared at the box. He'd loosened his tie hours ago, and his sleeves were rolled up to his elbows – a far cry from his usual pristine appearance. Rachel found herself missing Jack's methodical approach to cases like this, then immediately pushed the thought aside. Novak was doing fine. Different, but fine. Though she had to admit, his tendency to drum his fingers against the table when he was thinking was beginning to fray her already worn nerves. But she'd long ago gotten used to his tendency to fill silence



with chit chat, so she supposed she'd eventually get used to this as well.

At the far end of the conference table, a man named Malcolm Wickers hunched over his laptop, his round face illuminated by the blue glow of the screen. He'd worked for the firm for three years, serving as their security tech. His thick-rimmed glasses kept sliding down his nose as he pored over the security footage, and he absently pushed them back up with his middle finger every few minutes. Rachel had noticed the habit about twenty minutes after he'd arrived, and now couldn't stop tracking it like a nervous tic. Still, his presence was a godsend. When they'd discovered Harrison's laptop locked down tight, Malcolm had been their salvation, arriving within thirty minutes of their call with a confident smile and a laptop bag full of what he called his "digital skeleton keys."

"Got through another section of footage," Malcolm announced, adjusting his glasses again. "Nothing unusual between 2 PM and 4 PM. Just normal office traffic."

Rachel nodded, trying to focus on the stack of files in front of her despite the heaviness of her eyelids. The words kept swimming on the page, and she had to resist the urge to reach for what would be her fifth cup of coffee. Her hands were already shaking slightly from the previous three.

The morning light was growing stronger now, and she could hear the building coming to life around them – elevator doors sliding open and closed, the distant murmur of voices, the occasional phone ringing. Two policemen—including Jennings—were out there to greet employees as they came in to let them know what was going on. From what Rachel could out together, many of them were being sent back home.

Each sound made Rachel tense, wondering if it might be news about Harrison...or another victim. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, a constant drone that seemed to bore into her skull.

"Here's something," Novak said, pushing a file across the table. "Smith and Harrison worked together on the Kepler case in 2019. Harrison prosecuted, Smith presided." He reached for his own coffee cup, found it empty, and grimaced. "That makes what, eight cases now?"

"Nine," Rachel corrected, scanning the document and adding it to their growing pile of connections. Nothing that screamed motive. Nothing that explained why someone would want to—"

"Hold up," Malcolm's voice cut through her thoughts, sharper than before. "You really need to see this. I think I got something..."

Rachel and Novak moved to stand behind him, leaning in to study the grainy footage. The detail wasn't the best Rachel had ever seen, but it was reliable. The timestamp currently displayed read 4:42 PM from yesterday afternoon. Rachel braced her hands on the back of Malcolm's chair as he leaned closer to the screen.

"Watch the front entrance," Malcolm said, tapping a finger against the screen.

A man in business casual attire – crisp button-down shirt, dark slacks – entered through the glass doors. It was, ironically, what they'd been told by Malcolm, the same sort of thing Harrison had been wearing the day before. There was nothing remarkable about the man, nothing that should have set off alarm bells, but Rachel felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up as she watched him pause just inside the entrance. His movements were too deliberate, too measured.

"I'm going to play it again," Malcolm said, rewinding the footage. "Watch his eyes."

This time, Rachel saw it. The subtle sweep of the man's gaze as he entered, the calculated way he took in the lobby. When his eyes found the security camera, his chin dropped immediately, obscuring his features. It was the kind of movement that

might look natural to anyone else – checking a phone, perhaps, or looking for something dropped – but to Rachel's trained eye, it screamed of premeditation.

"He knew exactly what he was doing," Novak muttered, voicing her thoughts. "Can you zoom in?"

Malcolm nodded, his fingers flying across the keyboard. The image enlarged, becoming grainier but revealing more detail. The man's shirt was light blue, possibly white. His slacks were charcoal gray. He carried no briefcase, no bag – nothing that might identify him as having legitimate business in the building.

"Now watch this sequence," Malcolm said, queuing up another clip. "Between 5:00 and 5:10, everyone leaves. I'm speeding it up, of course, but as far as I can tell, everyone has left work. Some also left early yesterday when word of what happened to Judge Smith started to make the rounds. So...by 5:10, everyone has left the building. Everyone except James and our friend in the button-down."

They watched as the building emptied, workers filing out in ones and twos, heading home for the evening. A woman in a red blazer checked her watch as she pushed through the doors. Two men deep in conversation, one gesturing animatedly. A maintenance worker wheeling his cart toward the exit. But their suspect and Harrison never appeared in the lobby footage again.

"I've checked every angle we have," Malcolm said, clicking through different camera views. "Front entrance, elevator bank, main hallways. But neither of them show up again."

"Is there a back entrance?" Rachel asked, already knowing the answer but needing to hear it confirmed.

"There is, but there are no cameras back there," Malcolm confirmed, pulling up a

building schematic on his second monitor."It's the building's blind spot.A small loading dock area, employee smoking section, and emergency exit.No surveillance coverage at all."

"That makes no sense," Rachel said, straightening up and beginning to pace.The conference room suddenly felt too small, too confined.Her footsteps echoed on the industrial carpet as she moved."Why come through the front, let yourself be seen, then leave through the back?Unless..."She stopped, staring at the frozen image on Malcolm's screen.

"Unless what?"Novak prompted, leaning forward in his chair.

"Unless he wanted us to see him.Wanted us to know he was here, but not enough to identify him."She turned to Malcolm."Can you clean this up?Get us a better look at his face?"

Malcolm's fingers were already flying across the keyboard."I can try to enhance it, maybe adjust for the glass distortion.The reflection's working against us, but I might be able to compensate for it.It'll take time, though."

"Do what you can," Rachel said, fighting back a yawn."When you have something workable, we'll send it to the bureau's tech team.Maybe they can—"

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, making her jump.The sudden movement sent a wave of dizziness through her, and she had to steady herself against the conference table.For a paralyzing moment, it felt all too familiar to what it had been like trying to work through her tumor.It's back,she thought, knowing it wasn't true but terrified of the prospect all the same.

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:04 am*

The buzz was a text from the bureau's administrative office, confirming they'd received her request for access to a list of recent missing persons reports. Rachel stared at the screen, her thumb hovering over the reply button. Somewhere in the data they were about to receive might be the key to all of this – the connection they needed to find Harrison before it was too late. If they could overlay current missing person's cases with hearings that both Smith and Harrison were a part of it, it might provide more helpful than they could even imagine.

The dawn light had evolved into full-on morning and somehow, she'd missed it. Sunlight streamed through the blinds and illuminated the dust motes dancing in the air. Rachel watched them swirl, disturbed by her movement. Her vision blurred slightly, and she blinked hard, trying to force herself to focus.

She pressed send on her reply back to the bureau, knowing that what came next would either break the case wide open or send them down another dead end that would have them diving into more case files and background checks. Either way, James Harrison's life hung in the balance, and the clock was ticking.

Behind her, Malcolm's keyboard clattered on, and Novak shuffled through another stack of files. Somewhere in the building, a phone rang unanswered, its shrill tone obviously not bothered by the drama unfolding in the same building. She wondered if it was someone calling for Harrison. And knowing that there was a good chance James Harrison might never make another phone call if they didn't act swiftly seemed to wake her up. A flare of nervous energy passed through her as she forced herself to sit back down and get to work while she waited for the missing person's reports to come through.

And all the while, her gut clenched with anxiety because she knew that while they were here, like busy bees in an office, their killer was still at large, likely planning their next move

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The conference room had transformed into something out of Rachel's early days in the bureau—when sleep was just a luxury for lazy people and the entire world seemed to buzz over the potential of the next break in a case. The room was positively thrumming with the controlled chaos of an active investigation hub. Steam rose from paper coffee cups scattered across the mahogany table, mingling with the sugary scent of glazed donuts that nobody had touched. The pastries sat in their pink cardboard box like exhibits in their own right, casualties of concentration. A half-eaten bear claw left abandoned on a napkin had begun to grow stale, its layers of pastry curling at the edges. The fresh coffee and snacks had been brought in Eloise Carter, a member of the staff who had come in and decided to stay, wanting to help nab whatever bastard had attacked Harrison.

The whir of laptop fans and the soft murmur of voices created a white noise that reminded Rachel of late nights at the bureau, the kind that stretched into early mornings when the trail was hot and sleep was a luxury they couldn't afford. She watched a young officer shuffle past the glass walls, his arms full of file boxes retrieved from Harrison's office. Each box represented more data to sift through, more potential threads to follow or dismiss.

Rachel rubbed her temples, studying the laptop screen before her. Her coffee had grown cold, a thin film forming on its surface, but she couldn't remember when she'd poured it. The list of missing persons cases had come through, and it was smaller than she'd expected. There were seven in all, each one a potential thread in this increasingly tangled web.

In the midst of it all, Novak gave an exasperated sigh as she sat his phone down for a moment. "Still no luck with Harrison's wife. The next-door neighbor is taking all the calls to help out. She's currently at the hospital in a state of shock, and Harrison's daughter is being watched over by an aunt."

Rachel nodded, placing a temporary strike through Harrison's wife as a potential source of information. Which was fine, really. She felt they would get the information they needed through their current approach...eventually.

Her phone buzzed against her hip, and she allowed herself a momentary distraction. It was Jack, sending a photo of Paige outside her school, crossing her eyes and sticking out her tongue while wearing her new purple backpack. The message with it read: Paige says have a nice day!

The normalcy of it caught in Rachel's throat—how her daughter could be having such an ordinary morning while she sat here hunting a killer. She traced her thumb across the screen, noting the small details: the wispy hair that had escaped Paige's ponytail, the slight scuff on her new sneakers, the way her smile still showed the gap where her last baby tooth had finally fallen out just weeks ago.

"Agent Gift?" Eloise Carter's voice cut through her reverie. The older woman's fingers moved across her keyboard with practiced efficiency, her reading glasses perched low on her nose. Silver hair pulled back in a neat bun emphasized her sharp features, and Rachel noticed her blouse was slightly wrinkled, suggesting she'd rushed in when called. "I've accessed the internal database, like you asked. Where should we start?"

In that moment, Rachel would have done anything for Eloise—she of the pastries and fresh coffee. "I'm not sure yet. But just knowing it's ready to go is a massive help. Thanks."

"Hey, Gift?" Novak said from the other side of the table. "We now have only six

missing person's cases. I just got a call, and it seems one of them is being closed."

"Which one?" Rachel said, looking to the list and details on her laptop.

"Angela Martinez, seventeen. Richmond PD is closing it?" Novak leaned forward, a coffee cup warming his hands. The sleeve had started to unravel, and he picked at it absently. "Apparently, she was found at her girlfriend's apartment in Petersburg. They were planning to get married in Vermont next month when she turned eighteen and her parents...well, they weren't thrilled about the idea." He paused, scanning the report on his screen. "The girlfriend's parents took them in, already talking to lawyers about emancipation. Sounds like they've got a solid support system."

Malcolm, the security tech, hunched over his own laptop in the corner, muttered something under his breath as he worked with the surveillance footage. The overhead lights caught the sheen of sweat on his forehead. His tie had been loosened hours ago, and two empty energy drink cans formed a small garrison around his workspace.

Rachel stood, stretching muscles that had grown stiff from sitting too long. She paced to the window, watching the morning traffic flow past the building. People going about their normal lives, unaware of the drama unfolding in this room. A delivery truck double-parked across the street, its hazard lights creating rhythmic flashes against the building's glass facade.

She ran the other names through her head, trying to land on which one to go after. She knew that if any of these names were even remotely linked to Judge Smith or James Harrison, that was where they needed to go.

"Eloise, can you check for Mike Dearborne in the server?"

"Sure can. One sec." Rachel sighed and turned to watch the woman search for the name in the internal servers. After just ten seconds, she was shaking her



head. "No. Sorry. Nothing."

"Let's run Patricia Walsh," Rachel suggested, turning back to watch Eloise navigate through the database. The clicking of keys filled the silence, punctuated by the distant sound of police radios in the hallway. Outside the conference room's glass walls, she could see uniformed officers turning away yet another confused employee. This was a young paralegal, clutching her purse to her chest as she was escorted back to the doors.

Eloise's sharp intake of breath drew Rachel's attention back to the screen. "Here we go. We've got a match. Agents."

At once, Rachel and Novak descended upon Eloise as she remained at one of the many laptops stationed at the table. "Looks like Dr. Patricia Walsh testified in the Mitchell case." Her fingers flew across the keyboard, pulling up document after document. "Neurologist, specialized in brain death criteria." Her voice took on the measured tone of someone reading a story they already knew wouldn't end well. "She was the expert witness who confirmed Marjorie Mitchell's condition was irreversible."

"Jesus, I think I read about that one," Novak said. "But there was nothing to this detail. What else do we have?"

With a bit of a tremble in her voice, Eloise went on. "The case involved one Marjorie Mitchell, age 68, massive stroke. She was maintained on life support at Saint Catherine's Medical Center. Her son, Nathan Mitchell, was attempting to sue for the right to remove life support, citing his mother's advance directive. But there was no such written record found."

As Eloise continues to scroll, the medical records went zooming past: CT scans, EEG readings, clinical assessments, all painting a picture of devastating brain damage.

"Judge Smith presided," Eloise continued, scrolling through the documentation. Her long fingers traced lines of text as she read. "And Mr. Harrison was the prosecutor representing the hospital network." She adjusted her glasses, frowning. "It's odd, though. The hospital's position seems to contradict standard protocol. Usually, they're the ones pushing to honor advance directives, if only to free up resources."

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:04 am*

Another officer appeared at the door, balancing a fresh tray of coffee cups. The aroma of fresh coffee cut through the staleness of the room, but Rachel barely noticed. Her mind was racing, connecting invisible lines between victims, trying to see the pattern that she knew must be there.

"Malcolm, what's the status on that surveillance image?" she called out, her voice sharper than she'd intended.

Malcolm glanced up, dark circles under his eyes suggesting he'd been at this longer than any of them. His tie was completely undone now, hanging like a surrender flag around his neck. "Best I could do." He turned his laptop around, revealing a grainy still frame of a man entering the building. The figure was easy to make out in shape, but the details of his face weren't great at all.

Rachel stood, her chair rolling back against the wall with enough force to make Eloise jump. "Send it to me. I'll forward it to our imaging team." She gathered her jacket from the back of her chair, nodding to Novak. "We need to talk to Nathan Mitchell."

"Hold on," Eloise called out, her voice carrying an urgency that made Rachel pause. Her fingers flew across the keyboard again, pulling up another document. "There's something else. The case notes mention Nathan has an older brother, Michael. He tried to intervene in the proceedings from abroad, even reached out to both Judge Smith and James—something about being the primary medical proxy before Nathan contested it."

"How far abroad?" Novak asked.

“Avignon, France. But the notes here also say he was very supportive and helpful to both staff and in answering any questions Judge Smith or the hospital staff and administrators had.”

“We’ll need his contact info, too, then,” Rachel said. “But for now, we need an address for Nathan Mitchell.”

“Got it right here,” Novak said, standing but hunched over his laptop.

Without another word spoken between them, they started moving toward the door. Rachel looked back to the others who had gathered in the room to assist. “Thanks for all of your help,” she said. “All of this likely saved us a day or two of monotonous digging.”

There were murmurs of response, but it was clear that they, too, were hooked into this case. And, like Rachel, they would not stop trying to help until Judge Smith’s killer and James Harrison’s abductor was caught.

As they walked, Rachel speed-dialed the bureau, letting the imaging team know that a high-priority email was coming. With the occasional glance up from her phone, she forwarded the email Malcolm had sent with the image of their potential suspect attached. Behind them, the hub of investigation continued its work.

Outside, the morning sun had burned away the last of fog, leaving behind a sharp clarity that seemed at odds with the murky waters they were wading through. A construction crew across the street had started up their jackhammer, the rhythmic pounding a counterpoint to Rachel’s racing thoughts. She looked at her watch and was amazed (and a bit appalled) to find that it had somehow come to be 9:42.

Rachel stared through the windshield, seeing not the parking lot before them but the pieces of the puzzle finally starting to align. “Two missing people, both connected to

Judge Smith," she said slowly."James Harrison and now Dr.Patricia Walsh..."She left the sentence unfinished, but they both knew where it led.The implications hung in the air between them, heavy as storm clouds.

"I think if things don't fully pan out with Nathan Mitchell," Novak said, "we should hit up Richmond PD to see what they have on Walsh's disappearance."

"Absolutely.Actually, I'll make that call now."

She did exactly that as Novak pulled out into traffic, carrying them toward what Rachel hoped would be answers, but what her gut told her would only be more questions.Because second by second, it was clear that this was becomingthat sort of case.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Cody Austin drummed his fingers against the steering wheel, watching the digital display on his dashboard tick from 10:04 to 10:05.The morning sun cast long shadows across the hospice center's parking lot, the light catching on patches of early frost that hadn't yet melted.He'd chosen this time deliberately—late enough so that the early morning set-up and back-to-routine actions were out of the way, and early enough to avoid the lunch rush of visitors.Every detail had been meticulously planned, just like his previous visit...the visit to gather information about Scarlett.

He smiled.The memory of her death brought a slight warmth to his chest, like savoring a fine wine.It had been just the first step and he had executed it well.

And now it was time for the next step.The backpack waiting in the passenger seat seemed to pulse with possibility.Inside, beneath the carefully selected stack of donated books, lay everything he needed.The tools of his trade, as he'd come to think of them during the past few endless nights.It was something he'd never even dared to

fathom back in his prison when he had been planning his revenge against Rachel Gift. But inspiration had struck, and who was he to push it away?

Through the windshield, he studied the building's facade. Three stories of red brick and large windows, designed to let in natural light—to give the dying their last glimpse of sunshine, he supposed. The architect had tried to make it look welcoming, with curved entranceways and decorative stonework, but Cody knew better. He knew what happened behind those walls. He'd spent weeks studying the building's plans, memorizing staff rotations, learning the rhythms of this place where hope came to die.

He allowed himself a thin smile as he recalled the countless hours he'd spent researching this place. The building's layout was etched in his mind like a tattoo: four wings radiating from a central hub, security cameras positioned at every major intersection but with significant blind spots in the auxiliary hallways. The staff schedules, the shift changes, the cleaning rotations—he knew them all.

The memory of his prison cell flickered through his mind—six by eight feet of concrete and steel, his home for a decade. But while others had withered in that confined space, he had thrived. The prison library had become his sanctuary, not for the reasons his counselors had hoped, but because every book was a potential weapon in his arsenal. Medical texts that taught him about the human body's vulnerabilities. True crime novels that showed him where others had failed. Classic literature that helped him understand the human psyche—how to manipulate it, how to break it.

Cody checked his reflection in the rearview mirror, adjusting the wire-rimmed glasses he'd chosen for this persona. They made him look scholarly, harmless—the kind of man who would donate classic literature to the dying. The irony wasn't lost on him. Prison had indeed made him a reader, though not in the way the system had intended. He'd devoured books not for rehabilitation but for technique: the precise

medical terminology in thriller novels, the detailed descriptions of how bodies failed, how systems shut down.

His cellmate had once asked why he spent so much time reading. "Expanding my mind," he'd answered with a smile, never mentioning how each page was another brick in the foundation of his revenge. How every word was bringing him closer to this moment, to Rachel Gift.

He stepped out of the car, shoulders squared beneath his casual blazer. The backpack settled against his spine with familiar weight as he walked toward the entrance, his footsteps crunching on the salt-scattered pavement—just in case it sleeted, which had been in the forecast for the last twenty-four hours. The sound reminded him of breaking bones—a pleasant association that brought another smile to his lips. Through the glass doors, he could already see the reception desk. Relief loosened his shoulders slightly—a new face sat behind the counter, not the sharp-eyed woman who'd been there during his reconnaissance visit a week and a half ago, when he'd been gathering intel on Scarlett.

The automatic doors whispered open, releasing a gust of warm air scented with antiseptic and artificial pine—someone's futile attempt at festive cheer. Fifteen days until Christmas. Fifteen days until these halls would be filled with well-wishers bearing gifts and false hope...some to people they had never met. How fitting that he'd chosen this season of giving to deliver his own special package.

The lobby was quieter than he'd expected, the morning lull settling over the space like a blanket. A small Christmas tree stood in the corner, its lights twinkling feebly against the harsh fluorescent overhead lighting. An elderly man dozed in one of the waiting room chairs, a magazine forgotten in his lap. A nurse walked past, her shoes squeaking softly on the polished floor, too focused on her clipboard to give Cody a second glance.

"Good morning!"The receptionist's voice was bright, her smile genuine.Young, probably new to the job.Perfect.Her name tag read 'Bea,' and she couldn't have been more than twenty-five.The kind of person who still believed in the inherent goodness of strangers.He almost pitied her.



*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:04 am*

Cody slipped into character like putting on a comfortable coat. "Good morning," he replied, his voice warm and slightly hesitant—the tone of someone unused to but eager for good deeds. "I heard about your Christmas book project for the residents. I have some donations, if that's all right."

Her face lit up. "Oh, that's wonderful! We're always so grateful for contributions."

He swung the backpack carefully from his shoulders, setting it down with deliberate gentleness on the floor...so that Bea couldn't see it. The zipper's rasp seemed unnaturally loud as he opened just the front pocket, where the books were stored. One by one, he placed them on the counter: *Wuthering Heights*, its spine carefully broken to suggest previous loving use; *Of Mice and Men*, pages deliberately dog-eared; *The Great Gatsby*, annotated in margins with a careful hand.

Each book had been chosen with purpose. He'd spent hours in secondhand bookstores, selecting volumes that looked well-loved but not decrepit. Books that suggested a thoughtful donor, someone who cared about literature and its power to comfort. Someone who could never be capable of the things he had planned. Also, it had clued him in to just how much he'd come to love books while he'd been in prison.

Bea ran her fingers over the covers. "Ooh, the classics! The residents will love them."

If they live long enough to read them, he thought, but said instead, "I hope so. Books were...something of a salvation for me during a difficult time." It wasn't even a lie. Those years in prison would have been unbearable without the library's resources. Every medical text, every thriller with a clever killer, every detailed

account of famous murders—they'd all contributed to this moment.

He zipped the backpack with the same careful motion, conscious of its other contents shifting slightly. The weight felt different now, more purposeful. Everything he needed was still there, nestled in the main compartment like deadly Christmas presents waiting to be unwrapped. He thought of Rachel again, wondering if she'd appreciate the metaphor when she finally understood what he'd done.

"Thank you again," Sarah said, already turning to place the books on a shelf behind her. "It's so nice to see people getting into the holiday spirit."

"Of course. Happy to help. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to you as well," Bea said.

He had turned to leave but paused before reaching the door, allowing a slight grimace to cross his features. The expression was practiced, perfected in front of mirrors—just the right mix of embarrassment and urgency. "I'm so sorry to ask, but...is there a public restroom I could use? It was quite a drive here. Traffic...yikes."

"Of course!" She pointed down the hallway to his right. "Second door on the left."

The corridor stretched before him like a promise, its institutional beige walls lined with generic watercolor prints—peaceful landscapes that would be the last thing some people ever saw. His footsteps echoed slightly on the linoleum, each step bringing him closer to the next phase of his plan.

He pushed through the bathroom door, feeling the weight of the backpack like an old friend against his shoulders. The relief that flooded through him was genuine, though not for the reasons the receptionist would assume. It had been almost too easy. No one had recognized him. No one had questioned his presence. No one had looked twice at

the backpack.They never did, not when you smiled and acted like you belonged.They'd been too blinded by his generosity because, as it turned out, generosity was now something people weren't used to seeing all that often.

The bathroom was empty, as he'd known it would be at this hour.His research had shown that the cleaning staff did their rounds at 9:15, and the morning medication distribution kept most mobile residents in their rooms until 10:30.He had exactly twenty-three minutes before anyone was likely to need this facility.And the residents wouldn't use this restroom, anyway.

The overhead lights flickered slightly as he walked past the row of empty sinks, their mirrors reflecting his composed expression back at him.He looked calm, collected—a man with nothing to hide.It was the same expression he'd worn when Rachel Gift had insisted he was guilty of four murders nearly eleven years ago, the same expression he'd worn when they'd released him from prison, when he'd told the parole board exactly what they wanted to hear.The same expression he'd worn when he'd watched Scarlett take her last breath.

Cody entered the stall furthest from the door, locked it with a quiet click, and finally allowed himself a real smile—not the benign one he'd worn for the receptionist, but the sharp, satisfied expression of a predator about to strike.He set the backpack on the closed toilet lid and reached for the zipper of the main compartment.

Everything was proceeding exactly according to plan.And soon, very soon, Rachel Gift would understand just how thoroughly he'd thought this through.How meticulously he'd planned every detail.How completely he intended to destroy everything she held dear.

How there was no way in hell she could stop him.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The address Novak had gotten from the database for Nathan Miller took them to the western rim of the city. Novak guided them through neighborhoods that seemed to grow more worn with each passing block. The late morning sun cast long shadows across yards dotted with Christmas decorations – inflatable snowmen listing slightly in the winter wind, unlit strings of icicle lights drooping from rain gutters, and the occasional nativity scene with plastic figures and glo-molds dulled by years of exposure. Each turn brought them deeper into a part of town that seemed frozen in time, where chain-link fences enclosed patchy yards and out-of-date cars lined the streets.

The sight of a particularly elaborate display – complete with animatronic reindeer and a massive Star of Bethlehem mounted on a roof – sent a jolt of anxiety through Rachel's stomach. Christmas was barely two weeks away, and she had yet to buy a single gift. The thought had been poking at her for days now, creeping into her consciousness during quiet moments in the investigation. Paige would be easy enough; her daughter had left a meticulously detailed list on the refrigerator, complete with links to specific items on Amazon. But Jack... Rachel sighed. How did you shop for someone who seemed to need nothing? Her new husband was frustratingly practical, the type who bought what he needed when he needed it, leaving no room for surprise gifts or thoughtful discoveries. She felt she knew him exceptionally well but could not think of a single gift he would like.

"You okay?" Novak asked from behind the wheel.

"Just thinking about Christmas shopping," Rachel said, turning onto Cedar Street. The houses here were smaller, closer together, their weathered siding and sagging porches telling stories of decades of deferred maintenance. "Your kiddo is still young, so there's some of that Christmas magic still left. It starts to disappear as they get older."

Novak smiled, the expression softening his usually serious features. "Yeah, I've heard that. Do you miss it, or does it get easier?"

“A bit of both, I guess.” She shook her head. “Sometimes I miss the days of assembly-required toys and batteries not included. I won’t lie about it.”

Her throat tightened slightly at the memory of Christmas mornings past. “Just two years ago, she still wanted to leave cookies for Santa. But almost right after Christmas that year, she informed me that the math doesn’t work out – that it would be physically impossible for one person to deliver presents to every house in one night. And because we don’t have a chimney...”

She sighed as Novak pulled up to the curb in front of a small ranch-style house with peeling mint-green paint.

“When I was nine, I caught my dad changing into the suit on Christmas Eve,” Novak said. “But I never said a thing. It would have destroyed him. He was a bigger kid at Christmas than I ever was.”

“I don’t think I ever really believed after the age of five,” Rachel said. “I was that kid.”

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:04 am*

Novak chuckled and said, "You know...I have no problem believing that."

The yard in front of the house was bare except for a few patches of yellowed grass and a single plastic candy cane stuck crookedly into the ground near the front door. The solitary decoration seemed more depressing than festive, like a half-hearted nod to normalcy in the midst of crisis. The windows were dark despite the growing dusk, but a battered Honda Civic sat in the driveway, its silver paint oxidized to a dull gray.

A cold wind whipped down the street, rattling the bare branches of a maple tree and sending an empty Amazon box tumbling across a nearby lawn. Rachel zipped her coat higher and checked her weapon out of habit before stepping out of the car. The wind had picked up, carrying the scent of woodsmoke from a nearby chimney mixed with the metallic tang of the sleet she'd seen in the forecast yesterday.

When they came to the door, Novak knocked, the sound sharp in the winter quiet. For a long moment, there was nothing. Then came the shuffle of feet, and the door opened to reveal an older woman with silver-streaked hair pulled back in a loose bun. She wore a cardigan that had seen better days, its elbows worn thin, and reading glasses hung from a chain around her neck. The scent of chamomile tea and something baking – cookies, maybe – wafted out from behind her.

"Yes?" she asked, eyes darting between them. Her fingers clutched the edge of the door, knuckles white.

Rachel held up her credentials, the gold badge catching the last rays of sunlight. "I'm Special Agent Gift with the FBI, and this is Special Agent Novak. We're looking for

Nathan Mitchell."

The woman's expression shifted from wariness to confusion, then to something approaching fear. Her grip on the door loosened slightly, and she took a small step back. "The FBI? I...well, Nathan isn't here right now. I'm his aunt, Tanya Beswick." She hesitated, then added, "Marjorie's sister." Her voice caught slightly on the name.

"May we come in, Ms. Beswick?" Rachel asked. "We have some questions about Nathan." She kept her tone gentle, professional, though her instincts were already cataloging Tanya's reactions, filing away the slight tremor in her hands, the way her eyes kept darting past them to the street.

Tanya's fingers worried at the hem of her cardigan, a nervous gesture that reminded Rachel painfully of her own grandmother. "I suppose...though I don't understand what the FBI would want with Nathan. He's done nothing wrong." She stepped back, allowing them into a living room that smelled of tea and what Rachel was now certain was cookies. A gingerbread-scented candle also burned on the small coffee table in the living room.

Family photos crowded the walls – many featuring a woman Rachel assumed was Marjorie Mitchell in healthier days. The images tracked a life in reverse: a smiling woman in a garden, arms full of flowers; the same woman at what appeared to be someone's college graduation—perhaps Nathan's; a younger version teaching a small boy to ride a bike. A half-finished puzzle occupied the coffee table, its edge pieces carefully sorted, and a medical journal lay open on the arm of a well-worn recliner, its pages marked with colored sticky notes.

"So, where is Nathan?" Novak asked.

"Nathan's been at the hospital," Tanya said, perching on the edge of the sofa. A throw blanket was folded neatly over its back, the kind of homey touch that spoke of

someone trying to make a space more comfortable during a long vigil."He practically lives there now, wanting to always be with his mother.He only comes home to sleep, and sometimes not even then.I have to remind him to eat most days."

"How has he been handling the situation with the hospital?"Rachel asked, noting the slight tremor in Tanya's hands as she adjusted her glasses.A teacup sat cooling on the side table, a lipstick stain marking its rim.

"As well as can be expected, I suppose.He's...beaten down.Sad."Tanya's voice wavered, and she clasped her hands tightly in her lap."They're trying to sue him, you know.His own mother's hospital, suing him for trying to keep her alive.It's unconscionable."Anger flashed briefly across her features, surprising in its intensity.

Rachel didn't say as much, but Tanya was conveniently leaving out some of the details she and Novak had seen in James Harrison's case files...about how Nathan was doing everything he could to drag the hospital's name and reputation through the mud.

"Can you explain the disagreement he's been having with the hospital?"Rachel asked.

"Well, the doctors are sure that they can bring her out of her coma...that she'll be fine with some recovery.But Nathan is trying to tell them that she would never want to be hooked up to machines and life support.I agree with him, of course...but there is no official documentation to actually tell is what Marjorie's wishes are."

It was basically what the statements back at Harrison's office had spelled out...just a much cleaner and slightly biased version of it.

"Do you know where Nathan was last night?"Novak asked, his pen poised over his notepad."I assume he has to abide by the hospital's visiting hours, right?"



Tanya frowned, her fingers now plucking at an invisible thread on her sleeve. "That's right. I assume he was here. He usually comes home after visiting hours." She glanced between them again, anxiety creeping into her features. "Though I... I go to bed early. The days are long, you understand, and at my age..." She trailed off, then added quickly, "I've been staying here these past six weeks – came for tea one afternoon and never really left. Nathan needed the help, you see. He's dealing with so much because of this hospital ordeal."

"Have you seen any changes in him?" Rachel asked. "Any mood swings or maybe uncharacteristic behaviors?"

She shrugged and said, "He's been tired a lot lately. Quiet... which was never really like him. But this hospital and his mother... it's drained him."

"Would you happen to know if he has reached out to either Judge Smith or an attorney by the name of James Harrison in the past few weeks?"

"Oh, I have no idea. I'm so sorry. But I... can I ask what it is you think he's done? Did the damned hospital get the federal government involved in this?"

"No, ma'am," Novak assured her. "Nothing like that."

Rachel exchanged a look with Novak, seeing her own thoughts reflected in his expression. "Thank you for your time, Ms. Beswick. We'll head to the hospital to speak with Nathan."

Tanya nodded and got up to usher them to the front door. She looked nervous now, almost sad. "Is he... is Nathan going to be okay?" she asked. "Is he in some sort of trouble?"

"We don't know just yet," Rachel said, even though she was starting to feel like

Nathan Marshall might indeed be in quite a bit of trouble. "But for right now, there's nothing to worry about. Thanks again."

They stepped back out into the chill less than five minutes after Tanya had invited them inside. Back in the car, Rachel turned the key but didn't put the vehicle in drive. The engine's rumble seemed too loud in the quiet street. "She can't confirm his whereabouts last night. That puts him in play for Harrison's abduction."

Novak was already pulling out his phone, his fingers moving quickly over the screen. "I'll call ahead, have security make sure he doesn't leave before we get there." He paused, then added, "You really think he could be our guy?"

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:04 am*

Rachel watched as Tanya's silhouette appeared in the front window, pushing aside a lace curtain to peer out at them. The older woman's anxiety was palpable even from this distance. "Right now, everyone's our guy as far as I'm concerned."

As they pulled away from the curb, they passed another house with an elaborate Christmas display. A little girl, no more than seven, stood in the yard watching her father arrange a light-up penguin family. Her pink coat glowed in the multicolored lights even in the daylight, and her delighted laugh carried through the car's closed windows. The scene tugged at Rachel's heart, reminding her of winters past when Paige would press her face against the car window, counting Christmas lights and making up stories about the families inside the decorated homes.

Those days felt impossibly distant now. Paige was growing up, trading wonder for logic, magic for reason. It was natural, Rachel knew, but something in her ached for those simpler times – before cancer and Alex Lynch, before her daughter learned that monsters were real and sometimes wore friendly faces. Before she learned that even mothers could be broken, could fail to protect their children from the darkness in the world.

Novak's voice pulled her from her thoughts. "Security's on alert. They'll keep eyes on Mitchell until we get there." He was studying her with the kind of careful attention that told her some of her thoughts must have shown on her face. She had been so zoned out in her own thoughts that she had barely even been aware that he had placed a call to the hospital while driving away from Nathan's home.

Rachel nodded as Novak merged onto the highway. The sun had nearly set now, and Christmas lights were beginning to twinkle to life across the city, creating rivers of

color along the streets below. In her mind, she could hear Paige's voice from years ago: Mommy, look at all the stars that fell into people's yards!

Now, her daughter would probably launch into an explanation of LED technology and energy efficiency. Rachel smiled despite herself. Maybe some of the magic remained after all, just in a different form. Paige's wonder hadn't disappeared; it had simply matured, transformed into a curiosity about how things worked rather than why they sparkled.

She pushed those melancholy thoughts away and found it harder than she expected. They had a suspect to interview—after dragging him away from his hospitalized mother. And if Nathan Mitchell turned out not to be their killer, Rachel feared they may be even farther behind than she feared.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The hospital parking garage seemed to amplify the winter chill, each gust of wind finding new ways to pierce through Rachel's coat. The concrete pillars cast long shadows, their edges sharp and unforgiving. As she and Novak made their way across the road that separated the garage from the primary grounds toward the hospital entrance, their footsteps echoed hollowly against the brick walls.

The looming structure of Saint Mary's Hospital rose before them, its windows glowing like countless watchful eyes in the noontime light. Rachel's stomach tightened as they approached the sliding glass doors, the mechanical whir of their opening like a whispered warning. Hospitals. She'd spent enough time in them to last several lifetimes, lying in beds while experimental treatments coursed through her veins, waiting in endless corridors for test results that might determine whether she lived or died. Now they felt like personal haunted houses, each antiseptic-scented hallway holding ghosts of her past suffering. Sure, she had spent some time in others, in other countries where the design and feel of the places were more like a spa than a

hospital, but at the core, they were all the same.

The smell hit her first as they entered—that distinct blend of disinfectant, rubber gloves, and something else she could never quite identify but that screamed "hospital" to her brain. It brought back memories of her own treatment days: the constant beeping of monitors, the squeaking of nurses' shoes on linoleum floors, the metallic taste of fear in her mouth as she waited for yet another round of test results. She could almost feel the ghost of the IV needle in her arm and the confined space of a scanner as she was sent in for another CAT scan.

The thought also triggered another wave of guilt when it made her think of others fighting for their lives in similar places. She hadn't been back to volunteer at the hospice center since Scarlett's death. The brave souls there deserved better. She needed to be more present, more consistent. I need to check the volunteer calendar, she thought. Soon. I can't just dig my head into the sand because of what happened to Scarlett.

But even that simple mental promise felt hollow, tainted by the knowledge that Scarlett's killer was still out there...and very likely in the form of Cody Austin.

"Gift?" Novak's voice pulled her from her reverie. They'd reached the check-in desk, where a tired-looking woman in purple scrubs waited expectantly. Her badge identified her as Sandra, and dark circles under her eyes suggested she was well into a long shift. She assumed this was who Novak had spoken to on the phone when she had been zoning out over Christmas decorations and how her life seemed to be unspooling far too quickly.

"We're here about Marjorie Mitchell," Rachel said, showing her credentials.

"Yes, Agent Novak told me on the phone." Sandra's fingers moved across her keyboard, the clicking sound oddly loud in the quiet lobby. "Third floor," she said

finally, glancing up with concern in her eyes. "Though you should know there's been some kind of disturbance up there in the last few minutes. I don't have all the details, but security's involved."

Rachel and Novak exchanged glances before quickening their pace to the elevators. A commotion in the same place the current suspect in their case was located? It seemed like far too much of a coincidence. The ride up felt endless, the floor numbers lighting up one by one with agonizing slowness. Rachel watched their distorted reflection in the elevator's metallic doors—she looked as tired as she felt, and Novak's usual composed expression carried an edge of tension.

When they finally reached the third floor, they found a tense tableau: roughly a quarter of the way down the hall, two security guards flanked a doorway while a cluster of nurses spoke in hushed, urgent tones nearby. One of those mobile laptop stations sat discarded to the side, its owner clearly having been interrupted.

"What's the situation?" Rachel asked, approaching the group. Her FBI badge caught the overhead light as she held it up. The security guards straightened, their hands instinctively moving closer to their belts.

One of the nurses, her gray hair pulled back in a severe bun, stepped forward. Lines of stress marked her face, and her name tag read Margaret Wilson, RN. "Mr. Mitchell refuses to leave his mother's room," she said. "We need to perform our regular checks, but he's becoming increasingly...difficult."

"He's grieving," another nurse interjected, younger, with kind eyes and "Emily" written on her badge. Her scrubs were decorated with cartoon animals, an oddly cheerful touch in the tense atmosphere. "But we still have protocols to follow," she admitted. "We can't properly monitor Mrs. Mitchell's condition with him interfering."

"This is her room?" Rachel asked, nodding to the door behind them and just slightly to

her left.

"Yes," Emily said.

"Has he made any threats?" Novak asked, his voice low and professional. Rachel noticed how his eyes scanned the hallway, taking in every detail.

"Not exactly," Margaret replied, smoothing her already immaculate uniform. "But he's been...volatile. Angry. He knocked over some equipment earlier when Dr. Stevens tried to examine his mother."

Rachel considered this, wondering how much the threat of a lawsuit might be playing into his behavior. Whatever the case, she understood that the entire situation was like a powder keg about to blow.

"Let me talk to him," Rachel said. "Alone."

The security guards exchanged uncertain looks. The taller one, his name tag reading "Garvey," spoke up. "Ma'am, he's been volatile—"

"I understand. But sometimes adding more people to a situation like this only makes it worse." Rachel met each of their gazes in turn. "Give me five minutes. If anything happens, I can handle myself." She didn't mention that her gun felt particularly heavy against her hip today, a weight she hoped she wouldn't need to rely on.

After a moment's hesitation, they stepped aside. Margaret Wilson looked a bit perplexed by the decision but remained quiet. Rachel entered the room, the soft beeping of monitors creating a mechanical lullaby of sorts. The lights were dimmed, creating shadows in the corners of the room. Marjorie Mitchell lay still in the hospital bed, tubes and wires creating a complex web around her body. Her skin had taken on the waxy pallor that Rachel remembered too well from her own hospital stays. A

ventilator hissed rhythmically, breathing for the woman who could no longer breathe for herself.



*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:04 am*

Nathan Mitchell sat beside the bed, his shoulders hunched, one hand gripping his mother's limp fingers. His other hand absently stroked her arm, as if trying to comfort her even in her unconscious state. He looked up as Rachel entered, his face hardening. Dark circles under his bloodshot eyes spoke of sleepless nights, and his rumpled clothes suggested he'd been wearing them for days.

"Get out." His voice was rough, either from disuse or too much use—Rachel couldn't tell which. He didn't even bother asking who she was, where she was from, or why she was there.

"Mr. Mitchell, I'm Special Agent Rachel Gift with the FBI." She kept her voice calm, neutral, though her heart was racing. Something about this room, this situation, felt wrong in a way she couldn't quite pinpoint. She shows him her badge and ID while keeping her distance.

His laugh was bitter, echoing off the sterile walls. "Of course you are. The hospital's really pulling out all the stops now, aren't they? Bringing in the feds to get rid of the problematic son?" He stood, his chair scraping against the floor with a sound that made Rachel wince. "What's next? The National Guard?"

"I'm not here about your situation with the hospital." Rachel moved closer, but maintained enough distance to give him space—and to keep herself out of immediate reach if he became violent. "It does raise some red flag for sure, but it's not why I'm here. Though I can see why you're fighting so hard. It's not easy watching someone you love like this. Feeling helpless."

"And how would you know?" he asked aggressively.

“I’m a cancer survivor. A tumor that was supposed to be a death sentence. And while I was dealing with that, I lost a husband and then a grandmother. And I lost them in...” She stopped, shocked that she was on the verge of getting emotional. “I lost them in absolutely awful ways.”

Something flickered in his eyes – surprise at her understanding, perhaps. But his voice remained hard. “You don’t know anything about this, though. You don’t know what it’s like to watch them keep her like this, trapped in her own body, when she’d want to be with Dad...her husband, gone for four years now.”

“I know more than you might think.” Rachel glanced at the monitors, their steady rhythm a counterpoint to the tension in the room. “I’ve spent enough time in hospitals to understand the feeling of being trapped here. The powerlessness.” She paused, choosing her next words carefully. “But I’m here about something else. Judge Marcus Smith. James Harrison. Dr. Patricia Walsh. Do those names mean anything to you?”

Nathan’s face paled slightly, the color draining away under the harsh hospital lights. He nodded and said, “They were involved in my mother’s case. The judge, the prosecutor...” His eyes widened, filled with something almost like accusation. “What about them?”

Rachel watched his reaction carefully. “Judge Smith is dead. And James Harrison and Dr. Walsh are missing. The working assumption is that whoever killed Smith has abducted Harrison and Walsh. Given their connection to your mother’s case, I need to ask where you’ve been the past few days.”

“Dead?” Nathan’s voice cracked. He ran a trembling hand through his disheveled hair. “Smith is dead and...and you think I—” He gestured wildly at the room around him. “I’ve been here. Ask anyone. I’ve barely left this room in days. I’m too exhausted fighting with these people who claim they’re helping her, but they’re just prolonging her suffering.” His voice broke, and tears welled in his eyes. “She’d want to be with

Dad now.I know she would.But they won't listen."

Rachel studied him.The dark circles under his eyes, the rumpled clothes that looked slept in – it all supported his story.But she'd learned long ago that appearances could be deceiving.Still, something about his reaction felt genuine.Raw.

"I need you to come with me and my partner, Mr.Mitchell.We need to get an official statement."

"I'm not leaving her."His jaw set stubbornly, and his hand tightened on his mother's."I can't.What if she wakes up alone?"

“The doctors and nurses will be h—”

“Fuck the doctors and nurses.”

Rachel's heart ached at the hope in his voice, even as her professional judgment told her that Marjorie Mitchell would never wake up again."You're not under arrest," she said carefully."But refusing to cooperate will only make things more complicated.We can do this the easy way.The sooner we talk, the sooner you can come back.This case...it's quite serious, and right now, any defiance you toss up is going to make you look more and more like a suspect."

Nathan looked at his mother's still form, conflict clear on his face.The monitors beeped steadily, marking the seconds of his indecision.Finally, his shoulders sagged."Fine.But I want to come back as soon as we're done.And I want updates if anything changes."

Rachel led him out into the hallway, where Novak waited.One look at her partner's face made her stomach drop.His expression was grim, and he held his phone in his hand.She knew before he spoke that something had gone terribly wrong.

"What is it?" she asked, though part of her already knew.

"The police found Dr. Walsh," Novak said quietly. "She's dead."

Nathan made a choked sound behind her, and Rachel turned to see genuine shock and horror on his face. Either he was an excellent actor, or they'd been looking at the wrong suspect all along. As that thought took root—the doubt working its way deeper into her mind—pieces began shifting in her mind, forming a new and disturbing picture.

Maybe Nathan Mitchell had nothing to do with these killings. Maybe all of the arrows pointing to guilt were indeed a coincidence. All she knew for sure was that they needed to get to Walsh's body and get

Nathan's official statement. Rachel gestured toward the elevator, noting how the security guards visibly relaxed as Nathan moved away from his mother's room. She saw him looking back, as if he fully expected the gathered nurses to storm into the room.

"Mr. Mitchell...you've been here all morning?" Novak asked.

"Yes. I swear. The nurses will back that up."

Rachel considered this. Depending on what they found on Walsh's body or at the scene, Nathan's morning spent in the hospital just might clear him.

But there was only one way to know for sure.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:05 am*

The back lot of Neurology Associates was the kind of place people hurried through, keys gripped between white knuckles. The buildings that surrounded most of it were quite impressive, but the lot itself gave off some very unpleasant vibes. Rachel studied the crumbling asphalt as she ducked under the crime scene tape, noting the faded yellow lines of parking spaces that hadn't seen fresh paint in at least a decade. The lot was hemmed in by brick walls on three sides, creating a shadowy canyon even at mid-morning. A single security light hung above the rear entrance, its protective cage filled with dead insects and wisps of old cobwebs that swayed in the bitter winter breeze.

The sound of distant traffic echoed off the walls, creating an unsettling acoustic chamber that made Rachel feel like she was underwater. She caught the acrid scent of cigarette smoke—probably from the hospital workers who snuck out here for breaks, judging by the scatter of butts near the building's service entrance.

The dumpster squatted against the back wall like a chunk of forgotten metal, its dark green paint peeling to reveal patches of rust underneath. The stench of old food and assorted medical waste made Rachel's nose twitch. Given the nature of the crime scene where Dr. Walsh's body had been found, she was quite happy she and Novak had insisted they drop Nathan Mitchell at the precinct first. Something about his anxious energy had set her on edge. His fingers had tapped incessantly against his thigh during the ride, and he'd kept nodding off in a way that made him look like he might never wake up again. Now, she wondered if they'd lost precious time catering to her instincts about him.

As she approached the dumpster and the single detective who was currently looking it over while two cops looked on, she spotted a familiar face from earlier in the

case. Officer Jennings's familiar bulk drew her attention. He stood at the edge of the tape, his usual easy smile absent, replaced by a grimness that seemed to age him. Sweat beaded on his forehead despite the cold air.

"Garbage crew found her," Jennings said, jerking his thumb toward the dumpster. His voice was rougher than Rachel remembered it, emotion bleeding through his professional detachment. "Almost dumped the whole thing before one of the guys riding the back for the controls spotted her arm." He shook his head, the badge on his chest catching the weak sunlight. "The manager ID'd her right away. Dr. Walsh had been here fifteen years. Said she rarely missed a day of work and was always eager to help the up-and-comers."

Rachel's gaze drifted to the detective by the dumpster. He was older, maybe mid-fifties, scribbling in a small leather-bound notebook with careful precision. The sight tugged at something in her chest—it reminded her of her first days with the bureau, before everything went digital. When details were captured in ink and instinct, not algorithms and databases. She thought of her own notes from the Judge Smith scene, stored safely in her phone, and felt a sudden, irrational longing for paper and pen.

She and Novak approached, showing their IDs and badges. "Detective..." Novak said.

"Detective Foster," he said, eyeing their badges. Rachel saw that he gave her a surprised look when he saw her ID. She still had to remind herself that everything she'd been through over the past three years or so had made her something of a celebrity—even more so than after she'd managed to capture Alex Lynch the first time all those years ago. As they greeted one another, a piece of newspaper skittered past, caught in a swirl of wind that seemed trapped in the lot's confines.

"What's it look like so far?" Rachel asked him.

"Nasty business, that's how it looks." His accent carried traces of Boston, softened by

years in the South.

"What can you tell me about the scene itself?" Rachel asked.

Foster gestured to the six-story parking structure visible beyond the lot's eastern wall, its concrete facades stained with decades of exhaust and rain. "Her car's still up there. Fourth floor, according to security. Been there since she disappeared three days ago." He paused, consulting his notebook. "Blue Honda Civic, tags match the missing persons report. Everything inside undisturbed, including her purse and phone."

The implications made Rachel's stomach tighten. Their killer was organized, methodical. He hadn't taken Walsh in the parking garage—too exposed, too many variables. No, he'd waited until she was somewhere more controlled, more isolated. Like her office, probably. And like Judge Smith and, so far as they knew, Harrison, nothing had been stolen.

Rachel reached into her coat, withdrawing latex gloves that crinkled in the morning air. The sound reminded her of hospital rooms, of her own time as a patient. She pushed the memory away, focusing on the task at hand. The metal of the dumpster was cool against her palms as she hoisted herself up, the edge digging into her stomach through her coat.

Novak's hands steadied her legs—firm but professional—as she leaned over the edge. The position was awkward, precarious, and she had to fight against the instinct to pull back from the nauseating smell that wafted up from below. It wasn't too bad, but she found herself suddenly thankful it was the middle of December rather than the middle of June.

Dr. Patricia Walsh lay crumpled among bags of medical waste and discarded office papers, like a mannequin in a sea of garbage. She wore a charcoal pencil skirt and cream blouse, now stained with coffee grounds and unidentifiable fluids. Her silver

hair was still perfectly coiffed, incongruously pristine among the garbage. A strand of pearls circled her neck—real ones, Rachel noted, not costume jewelry. She noted that she was on top of the garbage—that only a few things had been placed on top of her. She assumed this meant her body had been dumped here within the past few hours.

Rachel's throat tightened at the thought of such dignity discarded like trash. She remembered Walsh's credentials from the case file—top of her class at Johns Hopkins, pioneering research in neurology, hundreds of lives improved or saved through her work. All of it ended here, in a dumpster behind her own office.

Thinking of what they knew about Judge Smith, Rachel leaned in a bit more. She felt slightly silly, but looked beyond the embarrassment. Half-in and half-out of the dumpster, Rachel carefully examined Walsh's arms, rolling up the sleeves of her blouse. The bruising at the crook of her elbow told the same story as Judge Smith's body—needle marks from an IV line, surrounded by mottled purple-yellow bruising. But there was something else, something that made Rachel lean in closer despite the nauseating smell. Tiny puncture marks dotted the inside of Walsh's wrist, as if someone had been checking her blood sugar or running other regular tests. They were very small; if she'd not been expressly looking for such a thing, she would have missed them.

The implications clicked into place like tumblers in a lock. The killer wasn't just subduing these people—they were monitoring them, maintaining them. But why? What was the point of keeping them alive only to let them die? Rachel's mind raced through possibilities, each more disturbing than the last.

Her muscles protesting, Rachel lowered herself back to the ground. The morning sun had crept higher, but the lot remained stubbornly gloomy, as if the brick walls themselves absorbed the light. A delivery truck rumbled past on the street beyond, its vibrations echoing off the walls. Rachel blew air hard out of her nostrils as if to dislodge the smell of the dumpster.



"What do you think?" Novak asked, his voice low. He'd been quiet during her examination, respectful of her process, but she could see the same questions and connections forming behind his eyes.

Rachel pulled off her gloves with sharp snaps that seemed to punctuate her thoughts. "He's taking them somewhere first. Keeping them sedated." She glanced at the dumpster again, its bulk looming over them like an accusation. "The locations where we're finding them—they're not random. Smith in his own car, Walsh in the dumpster behind her office. These are places that meant something to them. It's almost like he's attempting to return them to their lives after they've died."

Her mind raced ahead, connecting dots with an urgency that made her pulse quicken. The killer was telling them something with these bodies, these locations. Something about power, about forcing people to feel trapped, helpless. Just like someone on life support, aware but unable to move, unable to choose...

And the Mitchell right-to-die case hung at the center of it all, a dark star pulling everything into its orbit. Smith had presided, Walsh had testified, Harrison had prosecuted. And at the core of it all was Nathan Mitchell, fighting to keep his mother alive while someone else had wanted to let her go. From what Rachel could tell, there was no way he was not going to turn out to be guilty.

But something about Nathan's reaction earlier nagged at her. The way his hands had trembled when they'd mentioned his mother's case, in particular. The look in his eyes that hadn't quite matched his words. The constant checking of his phone during the ride to the precinct. Was he nervous about something more than just being a potential target?

Yes, she thought. He's worried about his mother. He's worried she's being placed in unnecessary pain.

“If your hunch is right,” Novak said, “that means if Harrison also ends up dead, we should have eyes on any place that would be significant to him.”

“Exactly,” Rachel agreed. “But I’d much rather find him and make sure he doesn’t die first.” She sighed, taking out her phone. “But you’re right. We need to be pro-active on this. We need to get immediate surveillance on James Harrison’s home and office.”

“And we’ll need to make it discreet,” Novak added. “We don’t want to spook our killer—or tip off anyone who might be helping him.”

Somewhere above them, a door slammed in the parking garage, the sound echoing like a gunshot. Rachel’s hand instinctively moved toward her weapon before she forced it back to her side. She was relieved that no one had seen her do it as she flushed with embarrassment. Jesus, why was she so jumpy?

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:05 am*

"Let's go," she said to Novak, already heading for their car. "I'd really like to catch up to Mitchell. My gut tells me there's a very good chance he's still going to end up being our killer. And if not...well, we're going to be way behind and have no time to waste."

"Got everything you need?" Detective Foster asked.

"For now, I think so," Rachel said. "Thanks."

As she and Novak made their way back to their car, she saw the forensics team pulling into a spot not too far away.

"Tell me," Nova said as he got back behind the wheel. "Do you have any theories yet?"

"Just one," she said as she buckled her seatbelt. "Someone wanted these people to feel what it was like to be trapped in their own bodies. The question is, who had that kind of motivation?"

The answer was there, she was sure of it. Hidden in the details of a case that had torn a family apart three months ago. And maybe even waiting at the nearest precinct in the form of Nathan Mitchell. And if she was wrong...well, they needed to know as soon as possible before someone else turned up dead or missing.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

The precinct buzzed with a strange, gentle form of chaos that Rachel had come to expect from local law enforcement offices. While this particular station was one of the

city's better-equipped facilities—with its newly renovated bullpen and fresh paint still evident on the walls—it still carried that unmistakable air of municipal funding limitations. It was illuminated by harsh overhead lights that made Rachel grateful for the warmer, more considered lighting design at the FBI field office.

She and Novak strode through the maze of desks, their FBI credentials drawing respectful nods from the officers they passed. The sound of ringing phones and murmured conversations created a familiar white noise that seemed to grow more urgent as they approached the back of the bullpen. Rachel thought she might need to ask one of the officers where they'd stashed Nathan Mitchell but then she saw him sitting at a desk, speaking in a tired manner to a uniformed cop.

The cop saw them coming before Nathan did. He straightened when he saw them approach, his posture shifting from casual to alert in an instant. He was young—probably not more than two years out of the academy—but Rachel had worked with him before, though she could not recall his name.

He gave them a nod of acknowledgement as he got to his feet and extended his hand. "Agents, I'm Sergeant Ryan. I've been taking Mr. Mitchell's statement for the past twenty minutes or so." His voice carried a mix of deference and eagerness that Rachel often noticed in younger officers when dealing with federal agents.

"Has he been cooperative?" Novak asked.

"Mostly."

Novak nodded toward one of the interrogation rooms. "Thanks a ton for the assist. We'll take it from here. Is there a specific interrogation room we should use?"

"I think they're all open at the moment. Help yourself."

Novak looked to Nathan and said, "Mr. Mitchell, if you wouldn't mind..."

Nathan stood, his movements careful and measured..His eyes still looked beyond tired, and the crumpled, overworn clothes didn't help. Rachel wondered when the man had slept more than a handful of hours. But she also wondered if one of the reasons he might be so tired is because he'd been up to some very devious things after visiting hours at the hospital—namely abducting and killing people related to the case concerning his mother.

As Novak led Mitchell away, Rachel hung back with Officer Ryan for a moment. "What did you get out of him?"

Ryan looked to the file currently open on his laptop, referencing the notes he'd taken down while speaking with Nathan. "I had another officer check with hospital staff and they confirmed his story about the visits. He's there every day after work, usually arrives around 5:30 in and sometimes leaves for lunch. Other than that, he's there until 7:30, when they usually need to make him leave."

"Is he aggressive when asked to leave?"

"If so, it can't be so bad...no one mentioned it. But an evening nurse by the name of Maria Delgado says she sees him so often she could set her watch by his arrivals."

Rachel's mind immediately started calculating times. "Every single day?"

"Like clockwork, according to them. His workplace backed it up, too—they say he'd taken a few days off. The officer verified the days...they all line up with several days, including today, actually—when he was present at the hospital as soon as nine in the morning."

"And where does he work?" she asked, looking over to the other side of the room

where Novak was leading Nathan into an interrogation room.

"He works as an accountant's assistant at Morton & Associates, regular nine-to-five schedule."

Something about the regularity niggled at Rachel's mind. It felt too perfect, too neat. The victims had been taken in the evening hours, their bodies discovered before dawn. The timeline didn't exclude Nathan Mitchell, but it didn't condemn him either.

"Thanks, Ryan. We'll take it from here."

The young officer nodded, then hesitated. "Agent Gift? The guy seems pretty broken up about his mom. I mean, I know that doesn't mean anything definitive, but..." He trailed off, clearly wanting to help but aware of his relative inexperience. "And God only knows the last time he got a decent amount of sleep."

Rachel appreciated his instinct to share his impression. "Every detail helps, Ryan. Keep me posted if anything else comes up."

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She made her way to Interrogation Room B, where Novak had already settled Nathan Mitchell into a chair. The room was standard issue—bare walls, metal table bolted to the floor, uncomfortable chairs. A two-way mirror dominated one wall, though Rachel knew no one was watching from the other side. They hadn't officially brought Mitchell in as a suspect; this was still, technically, a voluntary conversation. There wasn't enough solid evidence to make it anything else.

Rachel took the seat across from Mitchell, noting how his fingers were clasped tightly together on top of the metal table. He nervously tapped at the surface with the gathered knuckles of his pinky; the sound echoed slightly in the sparse room.

"Mr. Mitchell," she began, "we appreciate you coming in to talk with us."

He nodded, his eyes darting between her and Novak. "You didn't really give me much of a choice."

"Maybe not. But I assure you, it's going to do nothing more than help you as we get deeper into this."

"Deeper? Look... I already told Officer Ryan everything there is to know. I really don't feel like going over it again." His voice made it seem like he might break down in tears at any moment. Maybe for his mother, Maybe because he looked exhausted. Or maybe both.

"Let's talk about your mother's case," Rachel said, keeping her voice neutral as she did her best to subtly sidestep his objection. "You were very involved in the legal proceedings, right?"

Mitchell's jaw tightened. "Of course I was. The monsters at the hospital insisted she stay alive by that machine...even after I made it abundantly clear that was against her wishes."

"And you feel they didn't honor those wishes?"

"They did not. The reasoning is because there is no living will, no instructions. My mother wasn't very organized. And I guess fifty-eight was still young to her. She didn't see the need for last wishes, a living will, that sort of thing."

"So the hospital...they are stating their default position in a situation like that is to do their best to revive her?"

"Yes. They've said that when it becomes clear there is no hope at all, they'll strongly consider pulling the plug. But she isn't getting worse. She's not getting better either. Which is why....it's why I know she'd want it this way. To live on a machine for however long and then maybe be saved only to live the rest of your life with all these complications..."

"They want to honor her life," Novak corrected gently. "Without any formal, written consent, they can't—"

"Ah, Jesus, here we go again. I know!" Mitchell's voice rose slightly, then he seemed to catch himself. He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. It's just...it's still raw. And if you...if you think I killed anyone over it, you're wasting your time while an actual killer is out there. All you have to do is look at my schedule. Work, the hospital, home. Over and over again."

Rachel watched his hands, now clenching tighter together. "Tell us about your interactions with Judge Smith."



"I never spoke to him directly," Nathan said. His right eye twitched slightly. "I...I did send some emails to his office. I was angry. I shouldn't have, but I was desperate."

"We'll need copies of those emails," Rachel said. They did need the emails and they could easily get them from Judge Smith's computer. But she wanted to see how cooperative Nathan would be.

"Of course. I can forward them to you. They're...they're not nice, but I swear they weren't threats. I was just begging him to reconsider."

Novak leaned forward. "What about Dr. Walsh? Did you have any contact with her outside of her testimony?"

Nathan shook his head. "No. None. I wanted to...I wanted to ask her how she could be so certain about Mom's condition, but my lawyer advised against any contact. He said it would look really bad in court."

"And what about James Harrison?" Rachel pressed. "The prosecutor."

Nathan's laughter was bitter. "No. He wouldn't even look at me during the proceedings. Treated me like I was some kind of monster for wanting to keep my mother alive. I really don't know if it was the sort of guy he really is, but he came off as a dick."

Rachel studied his face carefully. There was anger there, certainly, but was it the kind of rage that would drive someone to murder? "Your daily routine seems very structured, Mr. Mitchell. Work from nine to five, hospital until visiting hours were over. Every day."

"Is that a crime?" His voice carried a defensive edge. "I want to spend every moment I can with her. The doctors say she might be able to hear us, might be aware on some

level.I read to her, tell her about my day..."

"Yet you insist she'd rather be dead?"

"Than be on life support?A machine keeping her alive?Yes, I know that with certainty."

"Also, no one's suggesting it's a crime," Novak interjected smoothly."We're just trying to establish timelines."

Nathan ran a hand through his hair, mussing it further."Look, I know how this looks.The judge who ruled against me dies, then the doctor...I get it.But I'm not...I couldn't..."He took another deep breath."I'm trying to save a life, not take them."And now there were tears in his eyes.He wiped them away angrily and glared at them as if asking how much longer this really needed to go on.

Rachel exchanged a quick glance with Novak."Mr.Mitchell, would you be willing to provide us with your cell phone records?Credit card statements?"

"Whatever you need," he said quickly—almost too quickly."I have nothing to hide.I just want to find out who's doing this so I can focus on my mother.I'm sorry someone has died...truly.But I'm more concerned about my mother."More tears came, and when they trailed down his cheeks, he simply let them fall this time.

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"Your aunt mentioned you come home after visiting hours," Rachel said, watching his reaction carefully. "Always straight home?"

"Yes. I mean, sometimes I stop for groceries or gas, but mostly I just go home."

"Do you ever speak with your aunt when you come home?" Novak asked.

"If she's awake. But she usually just leaves me to my thoughts, you know? She knows how much the visits take out of me emotionally."

Rachel nodded slowly. "And your brother, Michael? When was the last time you spoke with him?"

Something flickered across Nathan's face—so brief Rachel almost missed it. "Michael? He...he left years ago. Before Mom got sick. I haven't heard from him since. He's living in France somewhere."

"No contact at all?"

"None. He made it pretty clear he wanted nothing to do with the family anymore." His voice had grown quieter, heavy with what seemed like old pain. "Why? Do you think he has something to do with this?"

Rachel kept her expression neutral. His claim that he and his brother hadn't spoken in years didn't line up with what they'd gathered from the case files. "We're just exploring all possibilities, Mr. Mitchell. Would you be willing to write down his last known address? Any contact information you might have?"

Mitchell nodded, though his movements had become more hesitant. "Sure, but like I said, it's been years. I doubt any of it is still good. And I'd have to get it from home. I don't have it in my phone or anything. Hell...you'd probably be better off to just get it from Aunt Tanya."

"One more thing," Rachel said. "The night Judge Smith disappeared—where were you? This would have been four nights ago."

He thought it over for a moment before answering. "I went straight home from the hospital. Aunt Tanya can verify. We watched some TV. I had a beer, read for a bit, then went to bed around midnight." He paused. "I know that's not much of an alibi, but it's the truth."

Rachel stood, signaling the end of the interview. "Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Mitchell. We'll be in touch if we need anything else. I do hate to say that until we can get an address for your brother, you have to stay here for a bit."

"Are you kidding me?" he asked venom rising up his voice. He was clearly angry that they were taking him away from precious time with his mother.

"I'm sincerely sorry," Rachel said as she and Nova left the room. "Someone will be in momentarily to instruct you where to go next."

When they closed the door to the interrogation room, she could hear Nathan screaming something in anger behind it.

Novak turned to Rachel out in the hallway. "What do you think?"

Rachel shook her head because, honestly, she wasn't sure. "I think his routine is too perfect. Like he's built himself an alibi without actually building an alibi. Also, I think he got very interesting when we mentioned his brother."

"Want me to give Tanya a call, see if she has Michael's address and phone number?"

Rachel nodded. "And while you do that, I'll run a check in the database for Michael Mitchell. We pretty much know that Nathan isn't being entirely truthful about their lack of contact."

The precinct's activity had settled into its afternoon lull, but Rachel's mind was racing ahead as she went in search of an available laptop to do some more digging. There were answers just within her reach...she could literally feel it now. And even though she'd much rather be out in the field getting those answers, she knew the hardest, coldest truths were often found in hunts through history and paperwork. Hopefully, that's where she'd find paydirt for this case as well.

Because of not, she wasn't sure where they could turn next.

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Jennifer Martinez's footsteps echoed through the hospital corridor as she made her way toward the elevator. Each step was a reminder of the twelve grueling hours behind her. Her shoulders ached from checking vitals, administering medications, and turning patients, but it wasn't just physical exhaustion weighing her down tonight. It was usually the emotional toll of it all, even on the best days. Still, she loved her job and was happy to bear the brunt of such a burden.

However, there was one part of today that was resting particularly heavy on her: the news about Nathan Mitchell had shaken her more than she cared to admit.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the darkened window of an empty patient room—faint, dark circles under her eyes, her dark hair escaping from what had been a neat bun twelve hours ago. The cross around her neck glinted in the artificial light, and she touched it reflexively, a habit formed over years of seeking comfort in

moments of uncertainty.

The elevator seemed to take an eternity to arrive. Jennifer leaned against the wall, her mind replaying the moment she'd first heard the news about Nathan. She'd been at the nurses' station, updating charts, when Noelle from the day shift had rushed over, her voice low and urgent: "They just took Nathan Mitchell away."

"Who did?" Jennifer had asked.

"I'm not sure. I heard it was a pair of FBI agents. They're saying something about murder."

Jennifer had nearly dropped her tablet. Murder? Nathan? The same man who had once brought coffee to the night shift nurses during his mother's worst nights...before things between him and the hospital had gotten tense? The man who cared so deeply about his mother that he was willing to risk everything?

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She'd ducked into the break room after hearing the news, finding herself alone among the mismatched furniture and the ever-present scent of microwaved leftovers. Dear Lord, she'd whispered, kneeling beside the worn couch, please watch over Nathan. You know his heart. You know he's only trying to do what he thinks is right. The prayer had felt inadequate, but it was all she could offer.

The elevator finally dinged, and Jennifer stepped inside, her mind drifting to the countless conversations she'd had with Nathan over the past several weeks. He'd always been there, sitting beside his mother's bed, reading to her or just holding her hand. Sometimes, in the quiet moments between Jennifer's rounds, she'd stop to talk with him. They'd shared stories about their faith, about family. He'd listened with genuine interest when she'd mentioned being a single mom, even offering to recommend a better after-school program for her son, Joseph, than the one she was currently using.

The thought of Joseph sent a fresh wave of guilt through her. Mrs. Peterson had already stayed an extra hour past her usual babysitting time. Jennifer glanced at her watch—6:35 PM. She should have already picked him up. Just another working mom letting someone else raise her child whispered that nagging voice in her head. Jennifer pushed it away, reminding herself that Joseph was fed, safe, and loved—even if she had to work long hours to keep it that way.

The elevator came to a stop, and the doors opened to the parking garage. Jennifer pulled her jacket tighter against the evening chill. Her footsteps seemed louder here, bouncing off concrete walls and steel support columns. The garage always made her nervous in the evening and the early morning hours, despite the security cameras and bright lighting. Row D, she reminded herself, scanning for her old Honda Accord.

As she walked, her thoughts returned to Marjorie Mitchell and her son, Nathan. After ten years of nursing, Jennifer had developed an instinct about these things. The slight changes in skin color, the subtle shifts in vital signs—Marjorie was slipping away, despite the machines keeping her body functioning. She'd seen it too many times before.

Just yesterday, she'd noticed the first signs of tissue breakdown, despite their best efforts at prevention. Marjorie's blood pressure had been increasingly unstable, requiring more and more intervention to maintain. These weren't the kind of details she included in her charts—they were more like pieces of a puzzle she'd learned to recognize over years of watching patients fade away.

I should have told Nathan, she thought, guilt gnawing at her again. But how could she? Every time she'd considered it, she'd seen the hope in his eyes, heard the conviction in his voice when he talked about his mother's recovery. In her heart, Jennifer understood his desperation. And she knew the doctors would not say anything until there was hard evidence to support the deterioration and worsening condition.

Her car came into view, and she reached into her scrub pants for her keys. The familiar weight of the cross around her neck seemed heavier tonight, a reminder of the moral complexity of Marjorie's situation. Yes, she believed in the sanctity of life, but she'd also witnessed enough prolonged deaths to question whether keeping someone artificially alive was always the right choice.

The key fob clicked, and the car's lights flashed in the dimness. Jennifer opened the driver's side door, her mind already on home, on Joseph's bedtime routine, on finally getting off her feet. She'd promised him chocolate chip pancakes for breakfast tomorrow to make up for another late night, and she still needed to stop by the store for—

The movement to her right registered a split second too late.



A shadow detached itself from behind a concrete column, and suddenly there was a man there, something dark and metallic in his hand. She knew it was a gun, but her brain seemed unable to process this. Jennifer's breath caught in her throat as he shoved her roughly into the car, her hip banging painfully against the steering wheel. Her nurse's badge caught on the door frame and clattered to the concrete floor.

The back door opened with a sound that seemed impossibly loud in the empty garage. Jennifer's heart hammered against her ribs as the man slid into the seat behind her. She could smell him now—a mix of cologne and something medicinal that made her stomach turn. The scent triggered something in her memory, something important, but terror drove the thought away before it could fully form.

"If you scream," his voice was surprisingly soft, almost gentle, "I'll kill you right here." The words fell into the space between them like stones into still water, creating ripples of fear that spread through her entire body.

Jennifer's hands gripped the steering wheel, her knuckles white. "Please," she whispered, her voice sounding foreign to her own ears, "I have a son—"

Pain exploded across the back of her head as something—the gun?—struck her. Stars danced at the edges of her vision as she let out a small, panicked shout. "Drive!" the man snapped, all gentleness gone from his voice.

Tears blurred her vision as she started the car. Her entire body was trembling now, making it difficult to guide the car out of the parking space. She tried to catch a glimpse of him in the rearview mirror, but he leaned forward, the side of his head appearing at her shoulder. The gun pressed into her seat, right against her spine, the pressure a constant reminder of her mortality.

"Where..." her voice cracked. She swallowed and tried again, tasting salt from her tears. "Where do you want me to go?"

"Oh, you just follow my directions." His breath was warm against her ear, making her skin crawl. "Follow my directions and this will all be over soon."

Over soon. The words sent ice through her veins. Jennifer's mind raced, trying to remember everything she'd ever heard about surviving an abduction. Stay calm. Look for opportunities. Make yourself human to them. But as she guided the car toward the garage exit, another thought kept intruding: Mrs. Peterson would only wait so long before calling someone. How long before they realized something was wrong? How long before Joseph started asking for Mommy?

She thought of the last time she'd seen him this morning, still in his Spider-Man pajamas, maple syrup from breakfast sticky on his chin as the babysitter showed up. "Love you to the moon and back," he'd said, their traditional goodbye. Had she said it back? She couldn't remember now, and the possibility that those might have been their last words to each other made her chest ache with a pain far worse than any physical blow.

"Left," the man said as they approached the exit. "And Jennifer?" She flinched at the use of her name. "Remember—I'm watching every move you make. Don't try to be clever."

Jennifer turned left, her hands shaking on the wheel. A prayer formed on her lips, silent but desperate: Lord, please. Not like this. Joseph needs his mother. Please, Lord, please...

But the gun remained pressed against her spine, and the man's breathing remained steady beside her ear, and the early dark of night spread out before them like an ocean she might never return from.

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Rachel's second wind had kicked in about an hour ago and she could feel the nervous energy of it thrumming through her body as she listened to the phone ring in her ear. The small office felt even more cramped, with Novak pacing behind her. He was also on the phone, his low voice mixing with the gentle hum of the precinct's ancient air conditioning system as he spoke with Director Anderson. Rachel heard some of the conversation as she waited for the line in her ear to be answered—currently on the third ring.

"Yes, sir. Full surveillance on both locations," Novak was saying. "If he follows the pattern, Harrison's office and residence are our best shot at catching our killer the act. Yes, that's right...correct. I don't see why we'd need more than one unit for each location."

Rachel stopped listening in as the line was finally picked up on the other end of her call. Tanya Beswick's voice came through, slightly breathless. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Mitchell, this is Agent Gift. I need to ask you about Michael—Nathan's brother. Do you have his contact information?"

"Oh, yes, somewhere..." There was a rustling sound on the other end. She sounded just as baffled as she had the first time they'd spoken, asking her about Nathan. "We don't exactly keep it on the fridge or anything," Tanya was saying as she started moving around. "He's been...well, distant isn't really the word. Ever since this whole terrible situation with poor Marjorie started..."

Rachel leaned forward in her chair. "He's living in France, correct?"

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"Yes, that's right." Tanya groaned a bit as she moved around on the other end. Rachel heard the faint sound of shuffling papers. "Let me just look through these folders. I know I have it somewhere..."

At that very same moment, the office door burst open without warning, causing Rachel to jump slightly. She and Novak both wheeled around at once. Officer Ryan stood in the doorway, his face flushed with urgency.

"Sorry to interrupt, but this is big," he explained.

"What is it?" Novak asked, ending his call with Anderson.

"We just got a call from St. Mary's Hospital. A nurse—she was leaving her shift, heading to her car. Says she saw another nurse by the name of Jennifer Martinez driving out of the parking garage in a hurry...and she's pretty sure there was someone else in the car, in the back seat, pressed really close to the back of the driver's seat." He paused, catching his breath. "This woman said that a few seconds later when she was headed to her own car, she found Martinez's hospital ID badge discarded in the parking garage."

Rachel's heart rate quickened. She turned back to the phone. "Mrs. Mitchell, I'm going to have to call you back." She hung up without waiting for a response. "Ryan, do we know if Jennifer Martinez had any connection to the Mitchell case?"

"Not sure, but the nurse who called it in is still on the line. I figured you'd want to talk with her."

"Take me to her." Rachel was already on her feet, following Ryan out into the bullpen. Several other officers were milling about with interest, picking up on the fact that something of importance was taking place. "While I'm talking to her," Rachel said to Ryan, "pull up everything you can find on Jennifer Martinez, please—especially her license plate number."

They reached Ryan's desk, where he diverted to another area, sitting at another desk to do as he had been asked. Meanwhile, Rachel grabbed the phone, taking it off hold. "This is Special Agent Rachel Gift with the FBI. Who am I speaking with?"

"Meredith Barker." The woman's voice trembled slightly.

"Ms. Barker, are you close with Jennifer Martinez?"

"No...not really. I mean, we're not really friends or anything. We've worked together for about three years now, though."

Rachel's fingers tightened on the receiver. "Do you know if she ever had any involvement with the Mitchell family? Marjorie Mitchell's case?"

There was a sharp intake of breath on the other end. "Oh yes. Jennifer was definitely involved with them. I saw her talking with Nathan Mitchell several times over the past few weeks or so. Hell...maybe months, at this point." Meredith lowered her voice. "There were even rumors going around that Nathan might have tried to bribe her to...you know...to accidentally unplug his mother. It was ridiculous, of course, but that was what was being said..."

Rachel's blood ran cold. The pieces were falling into place with devastating clarity. "And did you interact with Jennifer at all today?"

"A bit. Just polite, passing conversation."

“Did she seem any different than normal?”

“Not really. Not that I could tell.”

That was fine. She had more than enough to confirm a few different things. She thanked Meredith and hung up, standing motionless at Ryan's desk as the implications washed over her.

If Jennifer Martinez was indeed the fourth victim, then Nathan Mitchell couldn't possibly be the killer. He'd been in their custody for hours. Which meant they'd been wasting their time while the real killer was still busy making moves.

She spun around, nearly colliding with a uniformed officer as she rushed back toward the small office where Novak was on another phone call. Her mind was already racing ahead, calculating how much time they might have left. Judge Smith and Dr. Walsh had both died from complications of whatever drugs the killer was using... apparently in an attempt to sedate them. If Jennifer Martinez had just been taken, they might have a chance to save both her and James Harrison—but only if they moved fast.

Rachel waved at him urgently, causing Novak to look up from his call. The expression on her face must have told him everything he needed to know because he immediately said, "Excuse me, but I'm going to have to call you back. Something's come up."

"It's not Nathan," Rachel said as soon as he hung up. "He's been here with us for hours, but Jennifer Martinez was just abducted from St. Mary's parking garage. I just got confirmation that she had connections to the Mitchell case—there were even rumors she might have been willing to help end Marjorie's life."

Novak's face darkened. "If it's not Nathan..."

"Then we need to figure out who it is, and fast." Rachel ran a hand through her hair, her mind racing. "We need to get back in there with Nathan. He might know something he hasn't told us yet—something that seemed unimportant before but could lead us to the real killer."

They hurried toward the interrogation room, their footsteps echoing in the hallway. Rachel's phone buzzed in her pocket—probably Tanya Beswick calling back with Michael's contact information. But that would have to wait. Right now, every second counted.

The hallway lights seemed to flicker and shine with the same urgency Rachel felt in her chest. They had been so sure, so convinced that Nathan was their killer. Now that certainty had crumbled, leaving them with precious little time to prevent two more deaths.

Novak reached for the door handle, then paused. "How do you want to play this?"

Rachel took a deep breath, steadying herself. "We tell him the truth. His cooperation right now could mean the difference between life and death for Jennifer Martinez and James Harrison." She met Novak's eyes. "And we apologize. We were wrong about him, and we need to own that."

Novak nodded, his jaw set in a grim line. He opened the door, revealing Nathan Mitchell still sitting at the metal table, his head in his hands. He looked up as they entered, his eyes red-rimmed from exhaustion and stress.

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"Mr.Mitchell," Rachel said, taking the seat across from him."We owe you an apology.And we need your help."

Nathan's expression shifted from resignation to confusion.For a moment, he looked like a man who had just been snatched out of sleep."What?"

"Jennifer Martinez was just abducted from St.Mary's Hospital parking garage," Rachel said, watching his face carefully."Since you've been here with us, you couldn't have done it.It seems that we were wrong about you being the killer, and I'm sorry.But right now, I need you to look past that and think carefully.Who else might have a strong enough connection to your mother's case to want revenge?Who else might have been deeply affected by the court's decision?"

The color drained from Nathan's face.His mouth opened, then closed again.When he finally spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper."I can only think of one single person...but that wouldn't make any sense at all.

"What is it?"Novak pressed, leaning forward."Who are you thinking of?"

Nathan's hands began to shake."Michael.My brother Michael.He...he took it harder than anyone when Mom..."He swallowed hard."He couldn't handle watching her suffer.He wanted to let her go, but I...I couldn't.I couldn't give up hope.We fought about it.Badly.He left for his home in France right after the court's decision.I thought it was disgusting, but he said he refused to be here to watch it play out."

Rachel felt her pulse quicken."Are you certain he's still in France?"



Nathan took some time to think about it, and Rachel could see fear blooming in his eyes. "I haven't reached out to him in a while. Three weeks or so, maybe. And that was through text. But as far as I know, yeah...he's still in France. He...he's a disgrace. He wanted to be as far away as possible from all of this."

"How about your aunt?" Novak asked. "Does she perhaps have a better relationship with him than you?"

"Yeah, she's much more cordial. I think they email here and there, just touching base. But listen...I don't have much compassion for him, and I think he's a coward and a bastard for retreating. But there's no way Michael has been doing this. He just...he doesn't have it in him."

Rachel had heard the same thing out of so many mouths in the past, usually turning out to be false. It meant nothing to her. She turned to Novak and was about to suggest they head back over to speak with Tanya Beswick again. But before she could open her mouth, her phone buzzed at her.

Rachel stood up, her mind already racing ahead to next steps. They needed to put out an APB on Michael Mitchell immediately. They needed to check every short-term rental in the area. They needed to...

Her phone buzzed again. This time, she pulled it out, seeing an unsaved number on the screen. But she'd dialed it recently, so she knew who it was. She answered immediately, putting it on speaker.

"Mrs. Beswick?" she said.

"Yes. I thought you would want to know that I found Michael's information," Tanya said.

Rachel had no intention of telling her what she was currently suspecting. She'd rather get the next bit of information from Tanya Beswick without her feeling as if she was having to defend anyone. "That's great. Would you mind just texting it to my phone?"

"Oh...yes, of course. I'm sorry. I didn't even think of that."

"No worries. I do need to ask, though...when was the last time you spoke to Michael?"

"Oh...that would have been when Marjorie was put on life support. He'd come home when she fell ill."

"And you've not spoken to him since then?"

"Well, once on the phone, about...oh, six weeks ago? And we do email here and there."

"Do you know where he is currently?"

"As far as I know, he's still in France...at his home."

"And do you happen to know if he's married?"

She was vaguely aware of Nathan shaking his head at the interrogation table. As if to confirm this, Mrs. Beswick said, "No. He was divorced about two years ago."

In other words, if he's not at home in France, there's no one there who could tell me where he might be, Rachel thought.

Rachel and Novak exchanged looks; he had come to the same conclusion as Rachel.

“Thank you for your time,” Rachel said, ending the call. As she started for the door with Novak on her heels, Nathan spoke up, stopping them.

“Hold on. Wait,” he said. “What...what is it?”

"Mr. Mitchell," Rachel said, "to put it bluntly, I don't think your brother is in France at all. I think he came back home to get revenge."

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:05 am*

“No,” Nathan said with a bit of bass in his voice. “There’s no way in hell.”

"I need you to think very hard about where he might be taking these people after he abducts them," she said. "We can't take any chances, and I'm sure you know more about him than the—"

"I'm telling you right now that Michael did not do this!" He was nearly screaming it now, and Rachel could see from the hard set of his jaw and the tears welling up in his eyes that he had come to his breaking point. He was done helping them. And hell...she didn't blame him. They'd taken him away from his dying mother and were now telling him that they suspected his estranged brother of murder.

“Fine,” she snapped. She could only hope that having Jessica Martinez’s license plate number and now the name of a new suspect would give them what they needed. “Mr. Mitchell, I’ll have someone come in to have you sign a few release papers. After that, you’re free to go.”

“Thanks,” he spat.

Rachel almost wanted to push harder on him, to insist that he help. But again...she didn’t blame him for his lack of cooperation at this point. So without another word, she and Novak hurried out of the interrogation room with another suspect in their sights.

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

"One clear shot," Rachel muttered, eyes fixed on the road ahead as Novak guided the

sedan through evening traffic toward Saint Mary's Hospital. Traffic was thick but manageable, thankfully not at a stand-still.

"Clear shot?" Novak asked.

"Hospital parking garages are usually equipped with security cameras. If Jessica Martinez was indeed abducted by our killer, I don't know how security feeds would have missed it. So...one clear shot. That's all we need."

Novak nodded as he took a right at a red light. They could see the tops of some of the buildings around the hospital from where they were. Rachel's hope was that they'd at least have a clear shot of the man's face. She was, at this point, fully expecting it to be Michael Mitchell. But if she was wrong (again), they'd at least have something to go on. And it made her wonder why the killer would have done something so reckless. Was he getting more desperate to finish whatever work he had begun?

As they pulled into the hospital's main entrance, Rachel's suspicions about the increased security presence were confirmed. Two police cruisers were parked at awkward angles near the entrance, their presence drawing curious glances from hospital visitors hurrying past. A security guard sat in the small check-in booth, gesturing animatedly as he spoke with two officers. The single light inside the booth made it look as if a light from Heaven itself was shining down upon him.

"Looks like we're not the only ones with this idea," Ethan remarked as he parked their car.

Rachel was already unbuckling her seatbelt. "Good. Maybe they've already found something."

They approached the group, and Rachel noticed the guard was older than she'd expected, probably in his sixties. He wore thick glasses and a baseball cap. His

weathered hands seemed to move constantly as he spoke. His name tag identified him as Walter.

As she and Novak approached the booth, one of the cops took a step toward them as if to stop them. But Novak showed his credentials and nodded his appreciation.

"Agent Novak, FBI," he said. "And this is Agent Gift. We're here about the Jessica Martinez incident."

"Really?" the cop asked. "The feds are on this?"

"Yes," Rachel said. "It's very likely related to a case of multiple murders we're currently investigating."

From the booth, Walter nodded, his expression grim. "Well, come on over because I'm about to have a look at this footage."

"Were you not here when the incident took place?" Rachel asked.

Walter shook his head and looked genuinely sad. "Nope. I was just telling these officers – nobody mans this booth during the day shift. Nine to seven, it's all automated." He gestured to an array of screens behind him. "Come to the sensor, get your ticket, pay when you leave. Or, with the employees, wave your ID at the scanner. Anyway...we do have cameras. I've been going through the footage from the second floor where Ms. Martinez was parked."

Rachel leaned forward, her heart rate picking up. There was no room to stand in the booth—it was already crowded with Walter inside—so she and Novak poked their heads in through the opened sliding glass door.

Walter turned back to his monitors, his fingers moving across the keyboard with

surprising dexterity."I've got it queued up.Just give me a second to..."

The screen flickered, showing the stark concrete interior of the parking garage.The timestamp in the corner read 6:38 PM.Rachel held her breath as Walter advanced the footage, frame by frame.The garage seemed eerily empty, the fluorescent lights casting harsh shadows between the concrete pillars.They watched as a woman she assumed was Jessica Martinez walked by, reaching into her pocket.

"There," Walter said suddenly."Behind that column.See him?"

Rachel's eyes locked onto the screen.A figure emerged from behind a concrete pillar, moving with deliberate purpose.The man's movements were smooth, practiced – nothing about them suggested hesitation or uncertainty.He had a goal in mind, and he would not be stopped.

The attack itself was brutally efficient.He burst from his hiding spot, closing the distance between them in seconds.Jessica's reaction was immediate—spinning away, her survival instincts kicking in with admirable speed.The struggle was brief, hardly a struggle at all, really.Rachel spotted the flash of the man's gun, ghostlike in the security camera footage, as he shoved Jessica into the car.He kept the gun pointed at her while he opened the back seat and got in.

"Back it up," Rachel requested, her voice tight."Right to when he first comes out from behind the pillar.Can you zoom in?"

Walter rewound the footage, then began the painstaking process of trying to capture a clear image of the attacker's face.The first attempt was too blurry, the second caught only his profile.Rachel felt her frustration mounting as they went through the footage again and again, each failed attempt adding to the weight of urgency pressing down on her.

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:05 am*

“Sorry,” he said. “Never was too good at this stuff.”

Rachel was about to volunteer to take over when the footage came to a promising spot. “Right there!” she said.

Walter let his hands off the controls, and the footage went still. He had zoomed in on a moment just before the attack, when the man had turned slightly toward the camera. The image was grainy, but the face was unmistakable – it looked very much like Nathan Mitchell...but it was not Nathan Mitchell.

"That's our guy," Novak said from behind her.

Rachel nodded, pulling out her phone to capture the image. The face on the screen bore an uncanny resemblance to Nathan Mitchell, but Rachel knew better now. This was Michael Mitchell, the true predator they'd been hunting all this time.

Rachel snapped the image from the screen, capturing the image on her phone. The pieces were finally falling into place, but the satisfaction she usually felt at this point in a case was overshadowed by a gnawing urgency. Somewhere out there, Michael Mitchell had two people trapped, their lives literally in his hands. Every minute they spent chasing leads was another minute those victims spent helpless, trapped in their own bodies.

“Walter, you’ve done a damned good job,” she said. “Just for the sake of covering all the bases, do you think you could email that shot of the man to my email?”

“Yeah,” he said proudly. “Might take some time, but sure.”



“Thanks.Good job.”

As they left the small shed-like structure, they nodded to the officers, then hurried back to their car.The evening sky was nearly all black now, making the stripped trees along the side of the garage look positively skeletal.Rachel felt the familiar tightness in her chest that came with cases like this – when the end was in sight but still just out of reach...and the scenery wasn’t helping at all.

"We should talk to Nathan again," Novak suggested as they got back in the car."Now that we can prove his brother isn't in France, maybe he'll be more cooperative."

Rachel considered this, turning the phone with Michael's image over in her hands."Maybe.But I think we might get more from his Aunt Tanya.She might know something about where Michael would take his captors – old hangouts, abandoned properties, places that meant something to their mother.And I think at this point, Nathan might be done with us.And I wouldn’t blame him."

"We could call her," Novak offered, already reaching for his phone.“Save some time.”

Rachel shook her head."Nathan's house is only fifteen minutes from here.She's still staying there, and this—" she held up her phone with the security footage image "—this will have more impact in person.People tend to be more forthcoming when they can't hide behind a phone call.This is proof, and I think it will pry up whatever information she has."

Novak nodded, though it was also one of those times Rachel almost wished he’d argue his point a bit more.Just because she had nearly eight years more experience than he did, he was always quick to just agree with whatever she suggested.Still, she could feel the shift in energy between them – the same electric anticipation that always came when a case was nearing its end.But this time, the feeling was tinged

with something darker.They weren't just racing to catch a killer; they were racing to save lives at the same time.

As they pulled away from the parking garage, Rachel found herself studying the security footage image again.Michael Mitchell's face stared back at her, unremarkable yet somehow menacing.This was a man who had watched his mother suffer, who had transformed that suffering into a mission of revenge.He was clever, patient, and, worst of all, he believed in what he was doing.That made him more dangerous than a mere killer.

The streets passed by in a blur as Novak navigated them toward Nathan's house.Rachel's mind was already formulating questions for Tanya, looking for the thread that would lead them to Michael's victims.She thought about James Harrison and Jennifer Martinez, trapped somewhere with this madman, waiting for either rescue or death.The image made her hands clench involuntarily.

"We're going to find them," Novak said quietly, as if reading her thoughts.

Rachel nodded, her jaw set with determination."Yes, we are."She looked out the window at the deepening twilight."But I'm afraid we're running out of time to do it."

The world outside their car had taken on the darkened hush of that odd moment between evening and night, but Rachel knew the night ahead would be anything but peaceful.Somewhere in this city, Michael Mitchell was watching over his victims, playing God with their lives just as he believed others had played God with his mother's life.Rachel's fingers tightened around her phone, the image of his face now burned into her memory.They were close – so close she could almost taste it.

But in her experience, these last steps were often the most dangerous.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

The Christmas lights cast an unsettling glow across Nathan Mitchell's neighborhood, transforming what should have been a scene of seasonal cheer into something almost grotesque. Multi-colored strands outlined rooflines and windows, their cheerful blinking now seeming more like desperate signals for help—the same decorations Rachel had seen earlier but now shining in all their glory in the night. Lights glowed and twinkled, inflatable snowmen bobbed in the December wind, their perpetual grins taking on a sinister quality. Rachel found it hard to look at them.

Novak pulled the car to a stop and took a deep breath. The contrast between the festive displays and their grim purpose here seemed to bother him just as much as it was getting under Rachel's skin. A mechanical Santa on someone's lawn raised its arm in an endless wave, making a quiet grinding sound that carried across the still evening air. The sound reminded her uncomfortably of hospital machinery—ventilators and heart monitors.

“You think Nathan's home yet?” Rachel asked as they approached the porch.

Novak checked his watch. “It's five-after-eight. I'd say he probably drug out his time at the hospital with his mother after we released him. I doubt he's home yet.”

Rachel nodded, her eyes drawn to a particularly elaborate display across the street—a full nativity scene where the floodlights created harsh shadows that made the figures look more like specters than saints. The baby Jesus in his manger seemed to be reaching out with grasping hands, while Mary's peaceful face appeared twisted in anguish. “Trying to make up for lost time with his mother. Can't blame him after we kept him cooped up in interrogation all day.”

Their footsteps crunching on the thin layer of frost that had formed on the concrete of the sidewalk. Icicle lights dangled from the eaves of Nathan's house, their cold white light creating prison-bar shadows across the front door. Rachel didn't recall noticing them earlier in the day. The porch light was on, but the rest of the house was dark save

for a warm glow emanating from what Rachel assumed was the living room window. When Rachel pressed the doorbell, she could hear the muffled chimes echo through the house.

Slow, hesitant footsteps approached, and Rachel could hear the subtle sounds of someone checking through the window to their right. The door then opened just a crack at first, and Tanya Beswick's face appeared in the narrow gap. Recognition flickered across her features, and she pulled the door wider, though her expression remained guarded. She was still wearing the same clothes from earlier, but they looked more rumpled now. She did her best to greet them with a smile, but it came off as forced.

"Agent Gift? Agent Novak?" Confusion colored her voice, mixing with exhaustion and a hint of fear. "I thought... I mean, you already questioned Nathan today, right? Did you not find him at the hospital?" She glanced past them into the night, as if expecting to see her nephew-in-law being led up in handcuffs.

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:05 am*

Rachel kept her voice gentle, aware of how their presence must seem like another assault on an already battered family. And she also knew they had no time to waste, so she skipped over all of the explanations and got straight to the point. "Mrs. Beswick, we need to talk. It's about Michael."

The name hung in the air between them like frost. Tanya's hand tightened on the door frame, her knuckles whitening.

"Michael?" Tanya's voice quavered. "But he's in France. He has nothing to do with—" She stopped, something clicking into place behind her eyes. Rachel could almost see the moments of doubt, the small inconsistencies that might have nagged at Tanya's subconscious, suddenly aligning into a terrible new picture.

Rachel reached into her coat pocket and withdrew her phone. The security footage still-frame she'd queued up showed Michael's face just before attacking Jessica Martinez in the hospital parking garage. The image was grainy but clear enough—a man moving with purpose, his stance familiar to anyone who knew him. She held it out to Tanya.

"Is this him? Is this Michael?"

Tanya's face crumpled as she studied the image, years of family history rewriting themselves in her mind. The slight shake of her head wasn't a denial—it was resignation, acknowledgment. The truth she'd perhaps known deep down but hadn't wanted to face. Her hand trembled as she reached out to steady herself against the doorframe, and Rachel instinctively stepped forward to support her.

"I swear," she whispered, her voice cracking like thin ice, "I had no idea. And Nathan...oh God, Nathan couldn't have known either." Her eyes snapped up to meet Rachel's, sudden fear replacing the shock. "You're saying he's...killing people?"

"It seems that way," Novak said.

"I don't...I just..." She started to cry softly and backed into the house. She gave a sad little half-gesture for Rachel and Novak to follow her inside. "You're sure?"

The question seemed to echo in the entryway, bouncing off the walls. Rachel chose her words carefully, watching as each one landed like a physical blow. "We're not entirely sure that's been his intention. But people have died, yes." She paused, allowing Tanya a moment to process this. The older woman's face had gone pale, and she swayed slightly where she stood. They were now in the living room, and Tanya practically collapsed into an armchair.

"What we need right now is to find him," Rachel said. "Is there anywhere you can think of... someplace that might mean something to him that he may be hiding away? Somewhere isolated, maybe?"

Novak stepped forward, his presence steady and reassuring. "It could be anywhere from their past, Mrs. Beswick. Any place that might have meant something to Michael or Nathan."

Tanya shook her head, wrapping her arms around herself as if warding off a chill. "I...I don't know," Tanya managed, her voice barely above a whisper. "He left for Paris right after college. Ended up in Avignon when he got married. He's barely been back since then...only twice that I know of, and one of those moments was when Marjorie was first put into the hospital." She glanced at a family photo on the wall, showing what must have been Michael's wedding day. "How could I not have seen this coming? How could none of us have known?"

"What about their childhood?" Rachel pressed, watching Tanya's face carefully. "Any places that might have been significant to them growing up?"

A flash of something—a memory, perhaps—crossed Tanya's face, but it faded into sadness. "Nothing I can think of. They lived in the same house until they both graduated and moved out. Marjorie—their mother—she moved after that, thank goodness." Her voice caught on her sister-in-law's name. "The old neighborhood..." She shuddered slightly. "It went downhill fast. Last time Marjorie mentioned it, she said half the houses on their old block were condemned."

Rachel felt a familiar spark of intuition, the kind that had solved cases before. If Michael was obsessed enough with his mother's case to kill for her, maybe he'd returned to where it all began—the house where she'd raised him and Nathan. A place where no one would think to look, in a neighborhood people avoided.

"Was it here in the city?" Novak asked.

"Yes."

"Do you remember the address?" Rachel asked, trying to keep the urgency from her voice.

Tanya's brow furrowed. "I went there a few times, but I can't...I'm sorry, I just can't remember the exact address." Her hands fluttered helplessly, as if trying to grasp at memories that kept slipping away. "Everything's just...it's all jumbled up now. Michael...I just can't believe..."

Novak was already pulling out his phone. "No worries, Mrs. Beswick," he said, his tone reassuring as he began dialing. "I can get it." He stepped away, speaking quietly into his phone as he contacted the bureau.

Rachel turned back to Tanya, who remained in the armchair, looking lost, tears gathering in her eyes. The Christmas lights from the porch cast colored shadows across her face, making her tears seem almost iridescent. "Thank you for your help," Rachel said softly. "We'll do everything we can to resolve this with minimal harm to everyone involved."

But even as she spoke the words, Rachel knew they might be a promise she couldn't keep. As she and Novak walked back to their car, Tanya made her way to the doorway again, a solitary figure framed by Christmas lights that no longer seemed capable of pushing back the darkness. Rachel couldn't help but think of how many families this case had already torn apart and how many more might suffer before it was over.

The neighborhood's cheerful holiday displays felt even more discordant now. Rachel chose to ignore them and the way it all made her feel. She was already busy trying to plan out their next moves, wondering if they were finally on the right track—and more importantly, if they still had time to save the lives that hung in the balance.

Novak ended his call as they reached the car. "They're pulling the address now," he said, his breath visible in the cold air. "Should have it in a few minutes."

Rachel nodded, her hand resting on the car door handle. She cast one last glance at Tanya's silhouette in the doorway. When they got into the car, Novak's phone buzzed at him. They both looked at the screen as she pulled it out. They had the address...the childhood home of Nathan and Michael Mitchell.

They took up their usual positions, and Novak keyed the engine to life. As they drove away, the Christmas displays in their rearview mirror seemed to blur together into a carnival of forced cheer, each blinking light like little fallen stars.

And like the darkness between those blinking holiday lights, time was running out.



## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

To Rachel, it almost seemed like the shine and glow of Christmas lights was following them like a plague of insects. As they closed in on the address, the multitude of decorations out in the yards they passed flickered in the darkness like dying fireflies. And as they drive deeper into more impoverished and suffering neighborhoods, the quality of the decorations got cheaper—maybe with the exception of the ten-foot Grinch standing in a small yard, looming over the house like a giant.

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Cheap strings of colored bulbs were draped haphazardly across chain-link fences and broken gutters, as if someone had tried to inject holiday cheer into a place that had long since rejected it. A plastic Santa lay face-down in someone's yard, half-buried in dirty snow, its cheerful red suit a jarring splash of color in the monochrome darkness.

"Three minutes," Rachel muttered, still staring at her phone, its blue glow illuminating the tension in her face. The red arrow pointed them toward what she hoped would be the end of this case. The address where Marjorie Mitchell had raised her sons. Twenty-two years in the same house, before everything changed. Before their mother's accident, before the court case, before Michael Mitchell's crusade of revenge had begun.

"You know this area?" Novak asked, his knuckles white on the steering wheel as they turned onto Maple Street. The street sign was barely legible, covered in rust and tilted at an awkward angle. Their headlights caught a stray cat darting between garbage cans, its eyes reflecting back at them like golden coins before it disappeared into the shadows.

Rachel nodded, her breath fogging the passenger window. "It wasn't always like this." She gestured to a burned-out convenience store they passed, its windows covered with plywood, graffiti sprawled across its facade like open wounds. The faded sign still advertised cigarettes at prices from a decade ago. Sometimes she forgot that Novak had been transferred from Raleigh three years ago and wasn't overly familiar with Richmond. "Ten, twelve years ago, this was solid middle class. Working families, block parties in the summer. The Mitchell boys probably rode their bikes down these streets, played baseball in the vacant lot over there."

She pointed to what was now a dumping ground for old appliances and construction debris. A broken washing machine sat in the center like a twisted monument. "Then the Reynolds Chemical Plant shut down, and everything just..." She trailed off as they passed another abandoned building, this one with a Christmas wreath hanging crookedly on its door, plastic pine needles scattered on the crumbling steps below. "Dominoes falling."

The streetlights were sparse here, many of them broken, creating pools of darkness between islands of sickly yellow light. Rachel could see the progression of decay in the buildings they passed—houses that had once been well-maintained now sagged with neglect, their paint peeling, porches listing to one side. Some had already collapsed in on themselves, like bodies giving up the fight. A child's bicycle, long abandoned, lay chained to a fence, its wheels missing, chain orange with rust.

"The fire three years ago was the final nail," Rachel continued, her voice low, remembering the news coverage. "Started in one of the abandoned warehouses, spread to three blocks of homes. Insurance companies already wouldn't cover most properties here. People just...left." She paused, studying the shadows. "But according to what we know, it looks like Marjorie Mitchell had moved out of here before things got really bad."

Novak slowed the car as they approached their target street. The Mitchell house would be at the end of the block, according to the address. But something caught Rachel's eye before they reached it—a car parked along the curb in front of one of the condemned houses. Her fingers flew across her phone screen, pulling up her case notes, heart pounding against her ribs.

"Stop," she commanded, her heart rate quickening. She looked at the car info on her phone and then to the license plate of the parked car. "That's Jessica Martinez's car." The vehicle sat silent and dark, a thin layer of frost already forming on its windshield. Rachel checked the plate number three times, though she already knew.

Novak killed the engine and the headlights, plunging them into near-total darkness. The only illumination came from a half-moon partially obscured by clouds. Rachel found that she actually missed the Christmas lights now. There was nowhere in this neighborhood to hang them, no families to put them up. The silence that fell was absolute—no traffic noise, no voices, not even the usual urban soundtrack of sirens in the distance.

They exited the vehicle in perfect sync, closing the doors with barely a click. The cold hit Rachel like a physical blow, seeping through her coat and making her fingers ache where they rested near her weapon. Their footsteps crunched softly on frozen grass as they approached the Mitchell house, each sound seeming unnaturally loud in the stillness..

The house was simple and dark, though appeared almost sinister—a dark, cancerous mass against the night sky. The porch was a broken-toothed smile, boards missing from its steps, rails hanging at dangerous angles. Ice had formed in the gaps between boards, gleaming dully in the weak moonlight. The front door had been officially sealed by the city—Rachel could make out the remnants of the notice, yellow paper faded almost white with age, stapled beneath a heavy steel plate bolted across the entrance. Someone had spray-painted "KEEP OUT" across the plate in red.

She caught Novak's eye and tilted her head toward the side of the house. He nodded, understanding her intent without words. They moved in tandem, staying close to the building's shadow, their breaths creating small clouds in the frigid air. They ran side by side in silence, their breath forming little clouds of vapor that puffed out alongside them.

The side yard was overgrown, dead weeds crackling under their feet like tiny bones breaking. Rachel could smell decay—wet wood, moldering leaves, the musty scent of abandonment. An old garden hose lay partially buried in the frozen ground, its green plastic bleached almost white by years of sun exposure.

They rounded the back corner, and she felt Novak tense beside her. There, descending into the earth like the entrance to a tomb, was a concrete stairwell leading to a basement door. Old toys and debris had collected in the corners of the steps—a plastic soldier missing its arms, a baseball so weathered the leather had split. The sight of these abandoned playthings, possibly left by the Mitchell brothers themselves, made Rachel's chest tighten.

The boards that had once sealed the basement entrance were now splintered and torn away, leaving jagged edges that reminded Rachel of broken bones. Fresh scratch marks in the wood showed where someone had recently forced entry, the pale exposed wood standing out against the weathered gray of the older surface. The sight sent a chill down her spine that had nothing to do with the December air. The marks of forced entry looked to have been caused by a crowbar; much of the frame had been torn away, its remnants lying on the old concrete.

Rachel drew her weapon, feeling the familiar weight settle into her palm. The grip was cold, and she had to consciously prevent her fingers from trembling. She locked eyes with Novak and began a series of precise hand signals: Me, kick, door. You, lead, entry.

He responded with a short nod, shifting his position to give her room to maneuver while staying ready to surge forward. The trust between them in this moment was absolute. Rachel wasn't sure they'd ever faced such a moment together—where they would have to deeply rely on the skill and precision of the other.

The stairs were treacherous in the dark, ice forming a thin glaze over the concrete. Each step had to be taken with careful precision; a fall now could be disastrous in more ways than one. Rachel positioned herself carefully, aware that a slip now could be catastrophic. She removed her small flashlight from her inner coat pocket, slipping it out like a secondary weapon. The small, bright beam revealed the wear and rot of the door in even more detail. When she reached for the knob, the door

handle was a cold lump of rust under her hand, confirming it was locked despite the damaged frame. She took a deep breath, centered herself, and channeled every ounce of strength into her leg.

The kick landed just beside the handle, where the frame would be weakest. The sound of splintering wood and tearing metal seemed impossibly loud in the quiet night, like a gunshot. Rachel had not expected the wood and other materials to be so weak. The door flew inward with a crash that echoed through the empty house, pieces of the frame flying far into the darkness beyond. Novak was moving before the door had swung all the way back, his figure a dark blur as he crossed the threshold. Rachel's heart hammered in her chest, each beat seeming to count down to something inevitable.

Rachel's flashlight beam cut through the darkness, illuminating a scene frozen in time. Wood-paneled walls straight out of the seventies, water stains creating dark continents on their surface. Shag carpet, once presumably blue, now a mottled mess of mold and decay. The beam caught movement to their right—a door opening, a figure emerging quickly.

The man from the security footage... Michael Mitchell. He wasn't wasting any time, it seemed.

His eyes were wild, his mouth set in a grimace of determination. Rachel saw the gun in his hand right away; it looked enormous in the flashlight's beam, the barrel swinging toward Novak with terrible purpose. Rachel saw everything with crystalline clarity: the tension in Mitchell's trigger finger, the way the light caught the gun's blued steel, the small Christmas tree air freshener hanging from a nail in the wall behind him, swaying slightly in the disturbed air.

“Michael Mitchell, drop the g—” Rachel started.

But she was interrupted by the booming thunder of his gun, pointed squarely at Novak.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

In the immediate aftermath of the gunshot, Rachel could only think of the bitter irony—that after everything, after all the planning and deception, it would end here, in the house where it all began. In the home where two brothers had once played and fought and grown up, now transformed into a battleground where one of those brothers was hiding away...and had just taken a shot at her partner.

The gunshot echoed through the basement, its report impossibly loud in the confined space. Rachel's heart seized as she watched Novak stumble backward, his hand instinctively clutching at his shoulder. But there was no time for horror or worry in that moment. Her training took over, her Glock already raised and aimed. She didn't want to kill Mitchell—that, to her, had always been a last resort, even in moments like these. But she had to do something to stop him.

So she fired. She aimed low, targeting Mitchell's leg as he tried to dive back into the darkness of the room he had come out of.

The muzzle flash illuminated the small hallway beyond for a fraction of a second, and Rachel knew she hadn't missed. Mitchell's scream of pain confirmed it, followed by the spray of blood that painted the wall in a crimson arc. In the harsh beam of her flashlight, the blood looked almost artificial, like something from a cheap horror movie set. But there was nothing artificial about Novak's labored breathing behind her.

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:05 am*

Rachel risked a quick glance back. Her partner had managed to prop himself against the wall, his face pale but determined. Through what must have been excruciating pain, he gave her a thumbs-up, his grimace morphing into something that might have been trying to be a reassuring smile. "I'm good," he said weakly. "Go..."

Relief flooded through her—the shot wasn't fatal. The knowledge steadied her hands and cleared her mind. She surged forward, following the blood trail into the room, her flashlight beam cutting through the darkness. What it revealed made her breath catch in her throat.

Two hospital beds dominated the small space, each with an IV stand positioned beside it. On the first bed lay James Harrison, his face slack and unnaturally peaceful. The IV line snaked from his arm up to a bag filled with clear liquid, dripping steadily through the tubing. She couldn't tell if he was already dead or just trapped in whatever chemical darkness Mitchell had confined him to.

The second bed held Jessica Martinez, and the sight of her made Rachel's stomach turn. Thick leather straps bound her wrists and ankles to the bed frame, the restraints cutting into her skin as she thrashed against them. A cloth gag muffled her desperate attempts to scream, her eyes wide with terror above it. Sweat had plastered her dark hair to her forehead, and tears tracked down her temples into her hairline.

And there, beside Jessica's bed, stood Michael Mitchell. His left leg was bleeding freely, causing him to favor his right leg. But he seemed barely to notice it. His gun was pressed against Jessica's temple, and his face wore an expression of eerie calm.

"Drop it," he said, his voice steady despite everything. "Drop the gun or I'll kill her."



"Michael," Rachel started, trying to keep her voice level, "think about what you're doing. This isn't—"

"Shut up!" The calm cracked, just for a moment. "Just shut up! You don't understand any of this. Set the gun down now or I will shoot her!"

Rachel could see Jessica's eyes squeeze shut, fresh tears spilling down her face. The woman's chest heaved with terrified, muffled sobs. She was beyond terrified at this point, her mind and body both in a state of panic; her limbs trembled involuntarily beneath the restraints.

Mitchell's finger tightened on the trigger, and Rachel knew he meant it. Slowly, telegraphing every movement, she began to lower her weapon.

"Fine," she said. "I'm lowering my weapon, Michael."

"That's it," Mitchell said, his voice regaining that unsettling steadiness. "Nice and easy."

Rachel set her gun on the floor, her mind racing. Mitchell kept his word, lowering his own weapon slightly—but then he reached for the IV line connected to Harrison's arm.

"I just wanted them to understand," he said, his voice taking on an almost dreamy quality. "To know what it felt like to be trapped inside your own body, desperate for an escape that would never come. Like my mother. They did that to her. They kept her prisoner in her own flesh."

As he spoke, his attention drifted between Harrison and Jessica, his guard dropping by fractions. Rachel watched, waited, measured the distance between them. She realized that in his worry about the gun, Michael hadn't even mentioned the flashlight

she was carrying. And really, why would he?

"I made mistakes with the judge and the doctor, but I think I got it right with Mr. Harrison, here. I think I—"

Rachel acted as quickly as she could. She hurled the flashlight forward with speedball force. It spun from hand in a smooth arc, end over end through the air. The beam created a strobing effect as it rotated, casting wild shadows that danced across the walls and ceiling. For a split second, the room became a chaos of light and shadow, reality broken into stuttering frames like an old film reel.

The flashlight connected with Michael's face with a sound like a baseball hitting a mitt. The flashlight clattered and she heard something crunch. He howled in pain, stumbling backward but managing to bring his gun up. Rachel was already moving, crossing the distance between them in three long strides. She hit him low and hard, driving her shoulder into his midsection. His gun went off, but it was pointed at the ceiling as they stumbled back together.

They went down in a heap, crashing into the IV stand. It toppled with a metallic clatter, the bag bursting as it hit the floor. Their momentum carried them into the wall, and the cheap wood paneling cracked and splintered under their combined weight. Michael's gun arm flailed wildly, and Rachel grabbed his wrist, twisting it hard. She could feel the tendons and bones grinding under her grip, knew that one more degree of pressure would snap something—

And then Novak was there. A single, strong wrapped around Mitchell's throat from behind. Together, they forced him face-down onto the floor. Rachel could hear Novak's breath coming in sharp hisses of pain, but his grip never wavered. She did notice, however, that he was doing the vast majority of work with only his right arm. She managed to get the handcuffs from her belt and clicked them around Michael's wrists, perhaps a bit tighter than strictly necessary.

Only then did she take a proper look at Novak's wound. The bullet had caught him low in the left shoulder, out along the edge. His shirt was soaked with blood around the entry wound, but the flow had already slowed to a trickle. It could have been so much worse.

Rachel turned her attention to Jessica, working quickly to undo the restraints that held he down. The woman's wrists were raw and bleeding where she'd fought against the straps, and when Rachel finally removed the gag, she broke into heaving sobs. She was trying to form words, but they were lost in the guttural noises that tore from her chest.

"It's okay," Rachel said softly, helping her sit up. "It's over. You're safe now."

Behind her, she could hear Novak checking Harrison's vital signs. "He's alive," he reported, his voice tight with pain but professional. He pulled out his phone, dialing with his right hand. As Rachel freed the last of Jessica's straps, she heard Novak behind her.

"This is Agent Novak. We need immediate medical assistance at 1247 Oakley Street. Multiple victims, one officer-involved shooting..."

Rachel tuned out the rest of the call, focusing instead on comforting Jessica while keeping one eye on the now-subdued Michael Mitchell. He lay quiet on the floor, but she could see his shoulders shaking. Whether from pain, fear, or something else entirely, she couldn't tell. He showed no real urgency to get up and remained quiet. She wasn't sure if this was a good thing or a bad thing. And she honestly didn't care. They had found him; they had stopped him and saved two lives.

The old box TV on the dresser reflected their tableau like a dark mirror: the wounded agent making his call, the traumatized woman clutching Rachel's arm, the unconscious man in his hospital bed, and the killer lying handcuffed on the floor of

his childhood home.It had ended where it began, full circle in the worst possible way.

It took less than three minutes before Rachel could hear sirens approaching.She closed her eyes for a moment, letting the sound wash over her.When she opened her eyes again, she caught Novak's gaze.He gave her another thumbs-up, this one accompanied by a genuine, if pain-filled, smile.Rachel found herself smiling back, the adrenaline slowly beginning to ebb from her system.

“You okay?”she asked Novak.

“Yeah.I think...I think it's.superficial wound.”

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Then, from the floor, Michael spoke up, his head turned to the right to keep his mouth away from the carpet. "MY mother...I did this for her. Wanted them to see...to feel what it's like to be trapped inside your own body. To be...to be..."

But he trailed off there, as if he wasn't exactly sure about his own motivations.

The sirens were growing louder, now having turned onto the street. And when they drew closer and the flashing reds and whites of the ambulance sirens came through the still-opened basement door, Rachel couldn't help but think of Christmas lights.

### CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

An hour later, Rachel stood in the hospital waiting room with her phone pressed against her ear, listening to the familiar comfort of Jack's voice. She was standing by the window, looking down onto the stretch of lawn that rolled out beside the hospital, connecting it to one of several parking lots. Her reflection in the dark window showed exhaustion etched across her face.

"I'm just glad you weren't hurt," Jack said, his voice tight with concern. "When you said 'shots fired,' my heart nearly stopped."

"I'm okay," Rachel assured him. "But Novak..." She paused, swallowing hard. "He took one in the shoulder. The doctors say it was more of a massive graze—about three-quarters of the bullet tore through the flesh and tissue of his lower shoulder rather than entering the arm."

She heard Jack's sharp intake of breath. "Jesus. That's lucky. How's he holding up?"

"Like it's just another day at the office," Rachel said, managing a small smile. "You know how these younger agents are—trying to prove they're invincible."

"Reminds me of someone else I know," Jack replied, and she could hear the knowing smile in his voice. There was a pause, then: "You want to talk to Paige? I can wake her—"

Rachel glanced at the wall clock and blinked in surprise. "It's 11:05? My goodness, how did it get so late?" The events in the Mitchell basement felt simultaneously like they'd happened minutes ago and days ago—the gunshots, the screaming, the flood of red and blue lights. Time had become fluid, stretching and contracting like a rubber band.

"Time flies when you're catching killers," Jack said softly. "Want me to get her?"

Rachel closed her eyes, picturing their daughter peaceful in sleep. "No, let her rest. I'll be home soon, and I can tell her all about how we caught the bad guy in the morning." Her voice caught slightly. "Though maybe I'll leave out some of the scarier details."

"Probably wise," Jack agreed. "You know how she worries about you."

"I know." Rachel's free hand drifted to a place high up on the back of her neck, where one of the scars from her tumor surgery was barely visible now. "I'm trying to give her fewer reasons to worry."

A nurse appeared in the waiting room doorway, catching Rachel's eye and gesturing for her to come over. "Jack, I need to go—the doctor's here."

"Okay. Hey, Rachel?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you.Come home safe."

The simple words, spoken with such quiet intensity, made her throat tight."I love you too.I'll be there soon."

She ended the call and approached the nurse, who introduced himself as Dr.Connor.His scrubs were decorated with tiny cartoon penguins, an incongruous touch of whimsy in the sterile environment.

"Agent Novak received twenty-six stitches," he explained, consulting his tablet."We did extensive sterilization of the wound site, given its unusual shape and depth.We'd like to keep him a bit longer to ensure the stitches hold properly because it was such an oddly shaped area."

"Thanks.And what do you know about James Harrison?"

"Well, I'm not assigned to him, but I knew you'd want to know, so I grabbed an update from the doctor attending to him."He paused, then added, "The doctor has begun the process of flushing the cocktail of sedatives from his system.Whoever administered them appeared to have only a rudimentary understanding of dosage and interaction—the combination looks like something cobbled together from internet research.Quite dangerous for sure, but he'll be fine."

Rachel nodded, thinking of Michael Mitchell's desperate amateur attempts to recreate his victims' comatose states."Thank you, Doctor.Can I see Agent Novak?"

"Of course.Room 412."

She made her way quickly down the hall, anxious to get home.She came to his room

and found Novak propped up in bed, his left shoulder swathed in bandages. He was scrolling through his phone with his good hand. His suit jacket and shirt lay ruined on a nearby chair, dark with blood and torn by EMT scissors.

"There's my hero partner," he said, looking up with a grin that was only slightly strained around the edges. "Just got off the phone with Sarah. I think she's more upset than I am—kept threatening to bubble wrap me before my next field assignment."

Rachel settled into the visitor's chair. "Smart woman, your wife."

"Yeah, well, wait until you hear her master plan. She's calling her sister to watch Joseph so she can come pick me up, and she's already talking about taking tomorrow off to 'nurse me back to health.'" He made air quotes with his good hand. "I told her it's just a flesh wound, but apparently that was the wrong thing to say. Something about men and their stupid Monty Python references."



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Rachel laughed, then grew serious. "You did amazing work today, Novak. And I don't just mean taking a bullet."

"What, that's not enough?" He waggled his eyebrows. "Tough crowd."

"I mean it," she pressed on. "You kept your cool through all of it...even when you were shot. That's not just good agent work, that's exceptional agent work."

Novak's jovial expression softened. "Coming from you, that means a lot." He shifted slightly, wincing. "You know, when they first partnered me with the famous Rachel Gift, I was terrified I wouldn't measure up. You're kind of a legend at the Bureau."

She hated hearing such things but had essentially gotten used to it. "And now?"

"Now?" He pretended to think about it. "Now I'm only mostly terrified."

She threw a wadded-up tissue at him, which he dodged with a laugh that turned into a groan. "Ow. No making the gunshot victim laugh."

"Sorry," she said, not sorry at all. "But seriously, Novak...Ethan. I'm proud to have you as my partner."

Novak nodded, and she could tell he was wrestling with emotion. He then made a shooing motion. "Go home, Gift. Your family's waiting, and my incredibly overprotective wife is on her way to smother me with attention."

"You sure?"

"Positive. Sarah's sister lives ten minutes away—she'll be here any minute to take over the hovering duties." He settled back against his pillows. "Besides, somebody's got to be fresh tomorrow to start processing all the evidence from Mitchell's murder basement...and start the report. Given that I'm going to be riding a desk for at least a week, that somebody is you."

Rachel stood, touched his good shoulder lightly. "Get some rest, partner. I'll check on you tomorrow."

"Bring coffee when you do!" he called after her as she left.

The hospital corridors were quiet, the late-night lull settling in. Rachel made her way through the maze of hallways, her footsteps echoing on the polished floors. In the lobby, a massive Christmas tree stretched toward the ceiling, its white lights casting a soft glow over the night security guard at his desk.

Outside, a fine drizzle of sleet had begun to fall, tiny ice crystals catching the light from the lampposts. The hospital's exterior was festooned with elegant strands of white lights and simple evergreen wreaths. Rachel paused, watching her breath steam in the cold air.

A week and a half until Christmas. The Mitchell case was solved, Novak would recover, and two innocent people would live to see the holidays with their families. Maybe, she thought, this holiday season would bring some peace after all. She pulled her coat tighter and headed for her car, eager to get home to Jack and Paige.

As she drove away, the hospital's Christmas lights twinkled in her rearview mirror like earthbound stars, a reminder that even in the darkest times, light found a way to shine through.

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

A warm and familiar voice settled in like a blanket over Rachel's sleep. For just a moment, she wondered if she was dreaming. "Mom?"

She didn't want to open her eyes. Her body felt heavy, weighted down by exhaustion that seemed to seep into her bones. Last night had been a whirlwind. The memories were there, lurking just beneath the surface of her drowsy mind.

"Mom?" Paige's voice came again, closer this time. "I know you're awake. I can see your eyes moving under your lids."

Rachel couldn't help but smile, even as she kept her eyes closed. "Since when did you become such an expert in sleep patterns?"

"I'm a master at faking sleep. Want to hear how many times I faked it only to get back to reading after you checked on me?"

"I'd rather not, thanks," Rachel said in a groggy voice.

Finally opening her eyes, Rachel found her daughter sitting there in her winter coat, backpack slung over one shoulder. The sight brought back a flood of memories from the night before – getting home at 11:45, exhausted beyond words. She'd barely managed to shower before collapsing into bed. Jack had been awake enough to kiss her cheek when she'd crawled in beside him, but that was all she remembered before sleep claimed her.

"I told Jack we shouldn't wake you," Paige said, fidgeting with the zipper of her coat. "But he insisted I say goodbye before we leave. He also said to tell you there are some pancakes left in the microwave for you."

Rachel pushed herself up to sitting position, noting the gray light filtering through the curtains. "What time is it?"

"Seven-thirty." Paige's expression brightened. "Did you hear the sleet last night? I was hoping they'd cancel school, but apparently a little ice isn't enough to shut down the district anymore."

"You only have three more school days until Christmas break," Rachel reminded her, reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind Paige's ear. Her daughter didn't pull away from the touch like she might have a few weeks ago, and Rachel's heart warmed at the small victory. And she reminded herself that Paige was nearly a teenager now. The attitude shifts were not only normal, but they'd probably get worse.

"Three days too many," Paige groaned, but there was a hint of a smile playing at her lips.

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"Oh, you'll live." Rachel held out her arms. "Now come here and give me a proper goodbye hug."

For a moment, Rachel thought Paige might resist – pre-teens could be so unpredictable about physical affection – but her daughter leaned in, wrapping her arms around Rachel's neck. The familiar scent of her strawberry shampoo brought back memories of when Paige was smaller, when goodbye hugs were a given rather than a gift.

"Love you, Mom," Paige murmured against her shoulder.

"Love you too, sweetheart." Rachel squeezed her tight for just a moment longer before letting go. "Have a good day at school."

As Paige's footsteps retreated down the hallway, Jack's voice called up from below. "Bye! Love you!"

"Love you too!" Rachel called back, listening as the front door opened and closed, followed by the sound of two car doors slamming and an engine starting up.

She flopped back against her pillows, knowing she should try to get more sleep but already feeling too awake. The events of the previous night began creeping back into her consciousness – the confrontation, the revelations about Michael Mitchell, the desperate race against time that had thankfully ended with two lives saved. But the paperwork... God, the paperwork was going to be a nightmare.

With a sigh, Rachel swung her legs over the side of the bed. The hardwood floor was

cold beneath her feet as she padded to the bathroom, splashing water on her face and studying her reflection in the mirror. The dark circles under her eyes weren't as bad as she'd expected, but there was a weariness in her face that makeup couldn't hide.

Dressed in comfortable slacks and a sweater, she made her way downstairs. The house was quiet now, peaceful in the way it only got when she had it to herself. The coffee maker was still warm – bless Jack for leaving it on – and she poured herself a cup before retrieving the promised pancakes from the microwave.

The first bite reminded her that she hadn't eaten since...when? Lunch yesterday? The pancakes were good, even reheated, topped with butter and the real maple syrup that Jack insisted on buying even though it cost three times as much as the artificial stuff. As she ate silently by herself, her thoughts drifted to Novak. She needed to check on him, make sure he was doing okay after everything that had happened. He'd handled himself well during the entire case and had seemed fine at the hospital last night, but she knew from experience how the aftermath of intense situations could hit hard.

She should start on her report too. The Mitchell case would require careful documentation, especially given how close they'd come to losing both Jennifer Martinez and James Harrison. And she supposed the lawsuit between Nathan and the hospital would come into play at some point, too.

The sharp ring of her cell phone cut through her thoughts. She walked to the kitchen bar where she'd left it, fully expecting it to be Jack or Paige. But she frowned when she saw Director Anderson's name on the caller display. More questions about last night, probably. She'd expected them, but not quite this early. Anderson was usually very good about giving his agents a moment to rest.

"This is Gift," she answered, taking another sip of coffee.

The gravity in Anderson's voice immediately set her on edge. "Rachel, Are you at

home?"

Oh God,she thought.He called me by my first name,her entire body seemed to go on high alert at this simple fact.

"Yes, sir, I'm home."The coffee cup found its way to the counter as she straightened, every instinct suddenly alert."What is it?"

As was always the case with Anderson, there was no beating around the bush.He got straight to the matter at hand.And when he did, Rachel felt the air in her house get sucked out, the pressure of the moment pushing down on her.

"Ten minutes ago, the bureau got a call for an assist at Goodrich Hospice."He paused."That's the hospice center you volunteer at, right?"

The world seemed to tilt slightly."Yes, it is."Her voice sounded distant to her own ears.She thought of Scarlett, of the time they'd spent together during her treatments and rehabilitation.She thought of Scarlett's dead body...and Cody Austin."What is it?What's the assist for?"

The silence that followed lasted only a heartbeat, but it felt like an eternity.When Anderson spoke again, each word fell like a stone into the pit of her stomach.

"It's a bomb threat.And from what we can tell, it's legitimate."

She sprang into action without even thinking about it.The coffee cup crashed to the floor as Rachel grabbed her keys from the hook by the door, but she barely heard it shatter.Her mind was already racing ahead – to the staff she knew by name, to the patients who couldn't be quickly evacuated, to the countless ways this situation could end in tragedy.

She didn't bother with goodbye.She hung up on Anderson without asking a single

question. She left her house so quickly that she nearly forgot to put her shoes on. The door slammed behind her as she ran for her car, the morning's peaceful domesticity shattered like the forgotten cup on her kitchen floor.

A bomb threat. The hospice center.

Her heart and gut told her that Cody Austin was at the center of this. And it also told her that the morning was going to start with chaos and death. And she was going to do everything she could to stop that from happening.